

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF BACKGROUND NOTES

THE REALITIES OF WALLACE STEVENS: AN INTRODUCTION

A NOTE ON SOURCES

DOMINATION OF BLACK

THE SNOW MAN

NUANCES OF A THEME BY WILLIAMS

THE EMPEROR OR ICE CREAM

SUNDAY MORNING

ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD

NOMAD EXQUISITE

THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST

THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

ANGLAIS MORT A FLORENCE

POSTCARD FROM THE VOLCANO

THE POEMS OF OUR CLIMATE

THE MAN ON THE DUMP

CONNOISSEUR OF CHAOS

OF MODERN POETRY

NOTES TOWARDS A SUPREME FICTION

It Must Be Abstract

It Must Change

It Must Give Pleasure

ANGEL SURROUNDED BY PAYSANS

AN OLD MAN ASLEEP

THE PLAIN SENSE OF THINGS

TO AN OLD PHILOSOPHER IN ROME

THE POEM THAT TOOK THE PLACE OF A MOUNTAIN

THE COURSE OF A PARTICULAR
FINAL SOLILOQUY OF THE INTERIOR PARAMOUR
THE PLANET ON THE TABLE
THE RIVER OF RIVERS IN CONNECTICUT
NOT IDEAS ABOUT THE THING BUT THE THING ITSELF
OF MERE BEING

LIST OF BACKGROUND NOTES

1. Epistemology: A Very Brief Introduction
2. Dialectic: Fifteen Versions
3. Tropes: Poetic Motions
4. Motif: Falling Leaves
5. "Sunday Morning:" Critical Perspectives
6. Motif: Gendered Pairs
7. Philosophical "Idealism"
8. Keats' "Ode to Melancholy"
9. Motif: Pastoral
10. Motif: Text and Textile
11. "Anachronistic Modernism"
12. Motif: Night and Sleep
13. Ramon Fernandez
14. On the Sublime
15. Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
16. Keats' "Ode to Psyche"
17. The Myth of the Given
18. The General and the Particular
19. Stevens as Public Poet
20. "Notes" as Metatext: Deconstruction, Decreation, Deconstruction
21. Motif: "I am that I am."
22. Reification
23. Motif: The Angel of the Imagination
24. Stevens' Politics
25. Stevens' Connoisseurship
26. Stevens' "Counter-Poetics"
27. "The Idea of Order at Key West" Redux
28. Evasion, Dasein, Deferral, Default, Deleuzion

29. Stevens/Whitman
30. Animus and Anima
31. Intratext
32. Pleasure: Philosophical Perspectives
33. Aporia and Anagnorisis
34. Diegetic Convergence
35. Metonym/ Metalepsis/ Metonymic Reduction
36. The Final Fiction
37. George Santayana
38. "To an Old Philosopher in Rome:" Philosophical Perspectives
39. Thanatology
40. Poetic Realism: Ruskin's "Pathetic Fallacy"
41. Paratext: "Of Mere Being"
42. Stevens and Post-Humanism

THE REALITIES OF WALLACE STEVENS: AN INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens is widely known, and often feared, as a “philosophical” poet. This does not mean, he is a philosopher who chose to write in verse like Lucretius or Lao Tze. Simon Critchely, one of the few philosophers to have studied Stevens closely and sympathetically, describes him as, “The most philosophically self-conscious and in my view philosophically profound of modern poets,”ⁱ but adds “that doesn’t mean Stevens needs to be a rigorous or original philosophical thinker,” a polite way of saying he is neither. The same, one hopes, holds true for his annotators and readers.

Nonetheless, the over-riding subject of Stevens verse is the relationship of poetry to what he calls “reality,” a special case of the central question of epistemology, the relationship of the mind to reality or of thought to things. Stevens conceived of imagination as a heightened form of consciousness and, hence, of poetic images as “ideas” in the extended philosophic sense of that term any mental phenomena, feelings, thoughts and impressions. Stevens’ poems then are about poetry and ultimately about themselves, in other words, metatexts which simultaneously explain and exemplify their poetics. Stevens wrote of this “supreme fiction:”

1

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry...the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,
As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands. ⁱⁱ

Readers cannot fully appreciate or often penetrate Stevens’ verse without engaging with his philosophical concerns albeit in a thoroughly unphilosophical, poetic way. The reward is to participate with one of the Twentieth Century’s most probing poetic intelligences as he struggles to determine the value of his work, asking whether poems are an escape from reality or a way of transforming it?

Stevens’ engagement with philosophical questions arose from this deep-seated ambivalence towards his own imaginative proclivities and prodigious poetic talents. His work and life were to a remarkable degree structured by a dichotomy - reality and mind - a split even manifested in the strict division of his days between his diurnal, public role as an insurance executive and his nocturnal, “semi-closeted” life as one of America’s leading poets. Stevens waited until he was forty-four to publish his first volume of verse, the highly accomplished *Harmonium*, and followed its warm reception with an unexplained thirteen-year poetic silence. The unusual, late poetic outpouring of his final two decades was launched by “The Idea of Order at Key West” in 1936, celebrating the imagination as the “single artificer of its world” beyond the maelstrom of reality. It concluded with its antimony, the austere poems of his aptly named last collection, *The Rock* from 1954, often read as palinodes or retractions of his earlier claims for the power of poetry to redeem modern reality

This division spun Stevens poetry between the centripetal force of his steadfast, even obdurate, commitment to “reality” and the centrifugal force of his fecund poetic imagination. It remains unresolved throughout his oeuvre, swinging between these poles from poem to poem, even stanza to stanza. It could take the form of splitting into male and female personae who in the course of a poem resolved their differences and achieved a transitory psychic integration, explained through metaphors of marriage, apprenticeship, cultivation and identification - but none of these solutions seem to have satisfied Stevens’ “never-resting mind.”

As a result, his is a poetry of qualification, some would say equivocation and contradiction, revealed through such signature locutions as, “it was like,” “as if,” “it seemed” or “say that.” Stevens famously insisted that “the real must be the base” of poetry, only to add “- but only the base.”ⁱⁱⁱ J. Hillis Miller observed, “At times Stevens is unequivocally committed to bare reality. At other times, he repudiates reality and sings the praises of imagination.”^{iv} Critchley points out that within two pages, Stevens declares: “We have to accept reality itself as the only genius,” and, “The imagination is genius.”^v If Stevens had not felt compelled to oppose and analyze these conflicting claims so strenuously, he probably would not have written poems which explore the poetic process with such unprecedented insight and urgency.

Much of the critical writing around Stevens discusses this governing dichotomy - reality and mind – in terms of a broad spectrum of psychological, cultural and philosophical currents: New England Puritanism vs. European Aestheticism, James’ Pragmatism vs. Emerson’s Transcendentalism, Freud’s Reality Principle vs. his Pleasure Principle, Idealism vs. Existentialism. Stevens was doubtless an informed, if distant, observer of the major intellectual tendencies of his time, though he rarely addresses them directly in his poems. (Some of these are outlined in the background notes indicated by Roman numerals in the text, listed at the end of the table of contents.)

The annotations to this collection of Stevens’ poems intentionally do not attempt to apply a consistent philosophical or interpretative framework across Stevens’ work, but instead to clarify the oscillations and vacillations which are such a pronounced feature of his verse and reflect what he called above, “life as it is, in the intricate evasions of as.” It would be unreasonable to expect a single definition of “reality” from so elusive and conflicted a poet as Stevens or a single poetic persona from a man for whom the self was itself a fiction. Therefore, whenever readers encounter the key terms “real” or “reality” in these poems and notes, they may want to place them in quotation marks, “under erasure” or insert, like Stevens, “as if.”

We look to philosophers, perhaps unfairly, for answers to the intractable problems of life but to poets to show us how to live with them more perceptively and perhaps pleasurably. Stevens was a poet confident and courageous enough to live with aporia or uncertainty, the state Socrates identified as the precondition for wisdom and perhaps its only absolute truth. Since Stevens speculates so uninhibitedly and provocatively about what reality could mean for a poet and a poem, he invites his readers to philosophize alongside him, sometimes even arguing as he does with himself. This brief preface tries to sketch the broad parameters of Stevens’ wide-ranging

explorations of poetics in the hope it will enable students and the lay public to engage in a close reading of the poet's major works with the same freedom and fervor they were written.

STEVENS' SYNTHESIS: A DIALECTIC OF THE IMAGINATION

Stevens, like his contemporaries, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound,^{vi} viewed modern humanity as "natives of a dwindled sphere,"^{vii} living in an imaginatively impoverished "time of dearth"^{viii} consequent to the post-Copernican "disenchantment of the world" and so-called "crisis of modernity" - now so protracted as to have become a condition. It may seem puzzling, accustomed, as we have become, to Post-Modern relativism, that Stevens, an avowed atheist, would in "Sunday Morning" need to exorcise his nostalgia for the illusions of orthodox religion. Nonetheless, he felt, "To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences... Yet it diminished us."^{ix}

Stevens and the other poets of modernity therefore became heirs to the Romantics' quest to heal the wound left in the Western psyche by the "dissociation of sensibility," science's separation of mind and nature, by suturing the epistemological divide between subject and object - without the aid of conventional religion or Wordsworth's failed "cult of nature." Eliot ironically looked back to monarchy and Anglo-Catholicism, Pound improbably forward to Italian Fascism but Stevens inward to the imagination to restore meaning and order to the "waste land" of modernity, in the belief that:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves.
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days."^x

For Stevens the imagination's "blessed rage for order"^{xi} could "stop the whirlwind, balk the elements"^{xii} by converting the "pressure of reality,"^{xiii} the constant barrage of inchoate sense stimuli against naked modern consciousness he felt so acutely, into poetic tropes or images which would provide the peace and pleasure the mind passionately seeks. He refers to this subjective object of desire as his "interior paramour," the "one of fictive music," the "She" of "The Idea of Order at Key West" and the "you" of the dedication of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," as well as that poem's final image, the "fluent mundo," stilled in the "crystal" of consciousness. Stevens, as lover, the active imagination and maker of this image, Pygmalion to his Galatea, also appears under a variety of heteronyms or aliases: the "Man with the Blue Guitar," "the ephebe," the "Giant of the Weather," the "pensive man," the "Captain," "Canon Aspirin" and "Professor Eucalyptus."

Stevens proposed a grand synthesis of real and mental into a metaphor through the tri-partite dialectic of the imagination which structures "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," his *Ars Poetica* and most systematic presentation of his poetics. 1) The mind resists the "pressure of reality" by *abstracting* it into itself 2) where the imagination *changes* it by infusing it with meaning and affect, 3) resulting in a poetic image or idea providing mental *pleasure* and peace. It might be objected,

however, that the purpose of this dialectic, a mind at peace, is undermined by its means, the continual need to forge original images or “first ideas.”

Stevens named these mental constructs, “fictions,” as so often with him, in its etymological sense, L. > *finger* to shape, fashion, originally, mold from clay. Fictions are man-made but not “made up” or untrue, rather made *out of* and *after* their “real base,” (which need not imply less real than it.) “The final belief,” Stevens wrote, “Is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else,”^{xiv} that is, no metaphysical, theological or “real” alternatives, because all the mind can ever experience is its own subjectivity. Poetry thus becomes not the escape from nature Stevens’ realism prohibited but the means of taming and cultivating it into the second nature of art, the earthy Paradise of “Sunday Morning,” the planter’s island and Catawba in “Notes” and finally the “more merciful Rome” of “To An Old Philosopher in Rome” - a place where the modern subject can dwell in peace. Stevens saw this ceaseless, human endeavor, which included poetry as the construction of a “supreme fiction” and a “amassing harmony.”^{xv}

We reason of these things with a later reason
And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.^{xvi}

The combination of modern skepticism and modern originality embodied in this dialect of imagination, meant that, “Modern reality is a reality of decreation in which our revelations are not of believe but portents of our own power,”^{xvii} in other words, truth becomes our own creation in place of traditional religion’s dependence on gods and myths. Stevens affirms that these fictions can “satisfy belief” and provide both an “accessible” and “expressible bliss” so that, “After one has given up belief in God, poetry takes its place as life’s redemption,” even claiming “God is the imagination.”^{xviii} “Notes” constitutes Stevens most confident and unequivocal affirmation that poetry can provide the “secular humanist” replacement the Romantics sought for the certainties of now discredited metaphysics. He often uses the metaphor of a fabric which can cloth modern consciousness, naked of myth, in a “final elegance,”^{xix} despite its expulsion from the Fool’s Paradise of religion for the original sin of science’s theocide. Even in “Notes,” however, Stevens subverts his demanding dialectic of the imagination with a “counter poetics,” renouncing mental activity in favor of a passive “untransformed,” direct view of reality, foreshadowing the “return to the real” of his later poems.^{xx}

STEVENS’ SEARCH FOR A POETRY OF THE “REAL”

What is surprising is not that Stevens’ later work can be read as a retraction of his earlier claims for the imagination but that he sustained his belief in the salvific powers of subjectivity for as long and as eloquently as he did. The dichotomy which pervaded his thought clearly valued reality as more “real,” while subordinating mind or subjectivity; consequently he often treated mental constructs, ideas or fictions as second-hand versions of nature. This accounts for why Stevens seems to have regarded poetry as a “guilty pleasure” best indulged in private, a frivolous “evasion” of the harsh

“facts of life,” unworthy of a hard-nosed businessman. He judged the poet’s “motive for metaphor” as “shrinking from the ABCs of being,”^{xxxi} an “immenser reality than his words,” so that poetry becomes a kind of cowardice, an ultimately futile effort to avoid the immutable givens of human fate by retreating into an effete aestheticism.

Stevens’ often reductive realism (or censorious Reality Principle) may betray his strong attraction to the seductions of the imagination and consequent fear that its fictions would lure him from the mundane entanglements of quotidian life into an intoxicating but ultimately suffocating solipsism or self-absorption. He believed, “the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to the real” and deemed that “the greatest tragedy in life is to lose touch with the material world.”^{xxii} Nor was Stevens alone in his misgivings about the solitary satisfactions of subjectivity; Romantic predecessors like Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats,^{xxiii} each warned against the perils of becoming trapped inside their own imaginative projections or fictions. Stevens stands out, however, for the vehemence of his (self-)disgust at poets’ modest “poetic license” and metaphoric indulgences in poems like the acerbic “The Man on the Dump” and nihilistic, “The Course of a Particular,” a bitterness suggesting a disappointed romance or, at least, Romantic.

As mortality, the human given in its most ineluctable form, confronted Stevens more urgently, his poems did not seek to escape into subjectivity or metaphysics, instead, they strove for a more immediate, “unmediated” experience of this ultimate reality or “otherness,” in his words, “to touch reality with the imagination.”^{xxiv} In his last published poem, “Not the Idea of the Thing but the Thing Itself,”^{xxv} a bird’s “scrawny” caw is accorded greater reality than the “faded papier mâché”^{xxvi} of his own shredded pages of verse. His last or “death poem” dismisses everything beyond its title’s “mere being,” including presumably poetry, as trivial “décor.” This “negative” or “anti-poetics” surfaces throughout Stevens’ oeuvre so that the “The Snow Man” from his first volume, *Harmonium* (1923) not only can be read as a mordant self-portrait and announcement of his thirteen-year poetic abstinence but would be fit perfectly in his aptly named final poems in *The Rock* (1954.)

xxvii

Stevens’ (self-)abnegation of the imagination’s active, synthetic powers finds its clearest expression in his austere late poetry, an act of “self-un-doing,”^{xxviii} worthy of Samuel Beckett except without the humor. Simon Critchley describes this final stage of Stevens’ verse as the “antipodes of poetry”^{xxix} and “the métier of failure,” where the poet confesses his inability to speak of reality, accepts its inviolable “otherness” and renounces any attempt to assimilate it as a fiction. He cites Beckett’s Sisyphean mantra from *Worstward Ho*, “Try again. Fail again. Fail better,” which would seem to mean more thoroughly and abjectly.^{xxx}

Such an ascetic aesthetic restricts poetry to apophantic utterances, that is, saying what it is unable to say or describing by exclusion, e.g., “the inconceivable idea of the sun.”^{xxxi} Critchley admires these late works because, “We see things in their mereness, in their plainness and remoteness from us and we accept it calmly without the frustrated assertions and juvenile overreachings of the will.”^{xxxii} Such mental quietude would at least achieve Stevens’ goal of a mind at peace which he equates with pleasure. Stevens aspires to know the “plain sense of things,” what he calls an “inert

savoir,^{xxxiii} to “feel the life of that which gives life as it is,”^{xxxiv} (without saying what that is.) He prophesizes the logical result of such poetic minimalism: “The final poem will be the poem of the fact in the language of the fact,”^{xxxv} which would seem to put an end of poetry.

Stevens “return to the real” may have been implicit in his atypically imprecise use of such key terms as “reality,” “the thing itself” and “facts,” suggesting that on some level he assumed them to be self-evident. At the same time, Stevens recognized that his belief in an “ultimate reality” or “given” was an a priori assumption, like any idea, even the idea of the absence of ideas. He insisted one must “be stripped of every fiction except one, / The fiction of an absolute,”^{xxxvi} a concession, given its centrality to his poetics, at least calling for additional comment. Earlier in that same poem, he described such unquestioned beliefs running through a poet’s work “the hermit in a poet’s metaphors;”^{xxxvii} if so, the “myth of a given,” of truths lurking in nature for the mind to stumble over, may have been Stevens.’ Phrases like “a myth before the myth,” a “day the world arranges itself into a poem,” “moments of inherent excellence,” “odors evoking nothing, absolute...nothing known,” catching the “irrational moment” like the flu and the real “disgorged” like Noah from the whale, imply Stevens tended to take the existence of “facts” anterior to thought on blind faith - as all faith must be. He does not seem to have addressed the arguments of anti-empiricist, skeptics, like Giambattista Vico, that “Facts are not found but made.”

Stevens, like his philosophical mentor, George Santayana was a materialist who opposed metaphysics and regarded consciousness as an epiphenomenon or by-product of physical processes, a view not dissimilar from that of contemporary neurophysiology. Stevens seems, however, to have inferred from this that thoughts are less real than objects, as if a chair were less “real” than a tree for being made. On occasion, Stevens reduced words, the “tools of his trade,” simply to sound or signs with no other connection with what they signified than habit or abstractions when only particulars were “real.” Such “poetic realism” imposes on poetry an epistemological standard, “truth to nature,” it could not help but fail. Plato, for this reason, banned poets from his Republic because they invented “lies” or fictions, while the literal-minded Victorian critic, John Ruskin, denounced metaphors as “fallacies” for imputing human emotions to nature.

Stevens’ distinction between a fiction which knows it is a fiction and a projection which doesn’t could be extended to ask if “facts,” “things” and even “reality” itself, might be an instance, perhaps the *locus classicus*, of reification or thing-ification, that is, turning an idea into a thing, object-ifying it as having a discrete, independent existence in the world? For example, does a root exist separately from a tree or a tree from a forest until an observer differentiates them? Is there a real before the mind real-izes it, that is, makes it a reality to consciousness?^{xxxviii} Why is an electrical discharge through a neural network which correlates with a poetic image, “less real” than a spark struck from a rock or any other quantum of energy? The question for Stevens and his readers is not so much the materiality of poetry as its ontology or relation to being.

STEVENS POST EPISTEMOLOGY: THE REALITY OF POETRY

Despite the pronounced realist sympathies of much of Stevens' later work, elsewhere he seems to allow that poetic experience might have a reality of its own. Stevens believed that life as far as we can be conscious of it must logically consist of consciousness: "There is nothing in life except what one thinks of it," and "We live in the mind."^{xxxix} Hence the only reality a conscious being can experience, inhabit, be certain exists or even have is his or her own subjectivity, in Stevens' terms, the "unreal," so that:

If it should be true that reality exists
In the mind...it follows that
Real and unreal are two in one.^{xl}

Stevens accordingly inverts the commonplace that life imagines poetry into, "Poetry is the imagination of life."^{xli} As importantly, the poet or subject is both the constructor of his subjectivity and the subjectivity he constructs, resulting in a second paradox, "The thing imagined is the imaginer."

This realization that Stevens and his fictions are "two in one" forms the dramatic or conceptual climax of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" in the eighth canto of the poem's third section. Here the poem's metaphor for metaphor, the angel of the imagination, messenger between the mental (tenor) and the real (vehicle,) disobeys its creator and flies into mental space to create a fresh and exhilarating metaphor, plunging Stevens into feigned *aporia* or bewilderment, so that he asks himself – and, by implication - his readers:

Am I who imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his? The lapis-haunted air?
Is it he or is it I who experience this?^{xlii}

If there is no difference between imagining a fictional experience and having that experience, then Stevens concludes he must be his fictions, not "I am *what* I am," but "As I am, I am,"^{xliii} (to which we might add, "in the intricate evasions of *as*.") This marks what Harold Bloom has called the "crossing of identification,"^{xliv} where a poet shifts his identity from his givens or "reality," his extra-poetic self as embodied in his third-person authorial distance, to his imagination, his images and subjective experience. Stevens' recognition that, as a subject, his reality is his subjectivity, serves to integrate the poem's previously divided poetic personae and transcend the poem's dichotomies – reality and mind, sensation and cognition, creator and his creation, lover and his paramour. Stevens overcomes, if only for a moment, his fear of solipsism and the atavistic taboo against self-love, returning full circle to the affirmation of imagination in his breakthrough poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West:"

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.^{xlv}

Now, however, he can admit that he on the shore and “she,” his song “beyond the sea,” are one and the same.

It is precisely because Stevens’ critique of poetry’s failure to approximate reality is so rigorous that his defense of poetry can be among the most persuasive and penetrating in English.^{xlvi} He recognized that a poet’s “measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract”^{xlvii} or liberate himself from spurious epistemological and metaphysical claims for poetry and defend it instead on its autonomous, pragmatic value as a source of mental peace and pleasure. This realization allowed Stevens to reframe the question of poetic truth from epistemology to psychology and from a posteriori, empirical facts to a priori, subjective values.

In doing so, this quintessentially epistemological poet ironically prefigured aspects of what has to come to be called post-epistemology.^{xlviii} Post- or constructivist-epistemology, to vastly oversimplify what is less a philosophical movement than an intellectual tropism, can be seen as a post-Post-Modern “return to values” which does not ask what truths are given *by* nature but what truths are given *to* nature, as Vico suggested. It is not concerned with “truth value” so much as what is valued as truth, as expressed in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s injunction: “Don’t ask the meaning, ask the use.” Thus question of post-epistemology is less “what is the case” than “what is the question?”^{xlix} The world is conceived as already saturated with meanings, affects, intentions and expectations, invested with purposes and a priori assumptions, what Wittgenstein called “forms of life,” J.L. Austin, “speech acts” and Charles Taylor, socially constructed meanings. This view of reality as always already valorized and of post-epistemology as the study of these valuations, finds an obvious parallel in Stevens’ dialectic of the imagination where the (real) vehicles of metaphors are infused with (subjective) tenors (meanings, feelings) to form mentally satisfying fictions.

If Stevens’ poems are viewed as “speech acts” or “performative utterances,” they are of a peculiar type, since they call the reader not to act but to share, recreate or reinterpret the poet’s subjective experience; thus, they call a subject or subjectivity into being.¹ These ephemeral acts of “self-creation” repeated ceaselessly are the ground for Stevens’ facetious inference that if “God and the imagination are one. Hence, I suppose, the imaginer is God.”^{li} Since the subject for Stevens is fictive or constructed, it can have no absolute truth or essence, only whatever contingent, useful or pleasing fictions it makes of the givens of its life. Death, for example, has always been seen as the quintessential human given, but how the mind thinks about that death is the closest it ever comes to it and must be created by every subject confronting it; this explains Blanchot’s paradox that the I is always dying but cannot experience death.^{lii} From a post-epistemological perspective, truth becomes like a poem, no longer absolute or given, but relative,^{liii} situated in time and space, hence ephemeral, perhaps no more than a velleity, *clinamen* (inclination) or intuition, what Stevens

describes obscurely as “The fluctuations of certainty, the change/Of degrees of perception in the scholar’s dark.”^{liv}

Blanchot’s argument that writing is always a tale of failure seems predicated on the assumption that its purpose is to describe reality, what he called the “second night” through which man stumbles an epistemological blind man. In this, he is, surprisingly, an old school poetic realist and a “dejected transcendental idealist,”^{lv} as Critchley describes Stevens. But Stevens rejects this position with what he calls his “intimidating thesis: “Absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes”^{lvi} and therefore fictions are facts, even the “fiction of an absolute.” Although Critchley criticizes this as the “idealist temptation”^{lvii} of subjectivism, Stevens’ thesis merely states that since subjectivity exists it must have a reality in its own right, not inferior for being ephemeral or verbal. As he writes, “A poet’s words are of things which do not exist without those words.”

In his last long speculative poem, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” from 1950, Stevens moves beyond his dictum that poetry must be “based in the real,” a specific time, place.

The poem is the cry of its occasion
Part of the res itself and not about it
... part of the reverberation
Of a windy night as it is...

The poem is its occasion as a cry, the cry it occasions from the poet. It is not *about* reality but a part or expansion of that reality, the “res,” and hence a “thing” in its own right; not about itself but the self it calls into being. Stevens uses wind here, one of his most common metaphors in poetry, usually referring to the destruction of time, in a new way, what he would call a “first idea.” The poem is a part of the wind, not reduced to *just* wind, as he sometimes does, but a specific form of wind which might be called significant sound. Stevens transforms the world into sound, the “reverberations” of a primordial breath^{lviii} of which the poet’s words are the ultimate articulation.

In the end, the whole psychology of the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world.^{lix}

“In the end,” subjective and objective, the self and the town, concur: speech acts, “said words,” (note that “said” is both a verb and participle) are the “life of the world” because the world is given life by being spoken by the living. Stevens moves here beyond Blanchot and epistemology, from what he can or cannot say about the reality, to the words fictions he can make “of” it, both *out of* and *part of* the world, what he calls “the poem of the act of the mind,”^{lx} as and about the act of the mind and the mind as its actions. Among the many realities of Wallace Stevens, he makes room for a poetry not about reality, in the sense of alterity or “otherness,” but about its own reality, hence the reality of a fiction. From this post-epistemological perspective, the subject of Steven’s poetry is inevitably the subject writing and reading it.

-
- ⁱ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death Reality and Literature*, revised edition (Routledge, London and New York, 2004), p. 217.
- ⁱⁱ Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, corrected edition, edited by John N. Serio and Chris Beyers (Vintage Books, New York, 2015), p. 513.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, revised, enlarged and corrected edition, edited by Milton J. Bates (Knopf, New York, 1989), p. 187. Many of Stevens' aphorisms quoted in this introduction and the notes its accompanys are from a collection of adages, left unpublished at the time of his death under the title, *Adagia* after those of Erasmus.
- ^{iv} J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," *The Act of Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, edited by R. H. Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1965), p. 145.
- ^v Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, op. cit. pp. 201, 204.
- ^{vi} Heidegger (1879), Pound (1885), Eliot (1888), and Wittgenstein (1889) were born within a decade of Stevens (1879).
- ^{vii} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 533.
- ^{viii} The phrase is taken from Heidegger's (1879-1976) question to the poets, "*Wozu, Dichter, in dürftiger Zeit?*" "Where to, poet, in a time of dearth?" which he answered with a line from Hölderlin, "*dichterisch wohnet der Mensch*," "man dwells poetically." Similarly, for Stevens, man makes his dwelling in his subjectivity, "We live in the mind." Quoted in Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Routledge, London and New York, 2005), p. 46.
- ^{ix} Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, op. cit. pp. 206, 207.
- ^x Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 405.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 425.
- ^{xiii} Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (Knopf, New York, 1951), p. 36.
- ^{xiv} Stevens, *Opus Postumus*, op. cit. p. 189.
- ^{xv} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 427.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 425.
- ^{xvii} Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, op. cit. p. 175.
- ^{xviii} Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, op. cit. p. 195.
- ^{xix} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 411.
- ^{xx} This "counter poetics" is most explicit in the seventh canto of each of three sections of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction." Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. pp. 408, 418, 428.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 304.
- ^{xxii} Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, op. cit. pp. 6, 7.
- ^{xxiii} Blake's "The Crystal Cabinet," Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," Shelley's "Epipsychidion" and Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," inter alia.
- ^{xxiv} Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, op. cit. p. 287.

^{xxv} The title seems a direct reference to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who argued in his *The Critique of Pure Reason* that the *Ding-an-Sich* or “thing-in-itself” (noumenon) cannot be known a posteriori or from observation, since any such observation would be in terms of the mind’s a priori “transcendental aesthetic and analytic” categories (perception and cognition.)

^{xxvi} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. pp.565,566.

^{xxvii} Critics had long hypothesized that a very late poem, “The Course of a Particular,” had been omitted from the *Collected Poems* of 1954 because it so closely resembled “The Snow Man” of thirty years before; recent research, however, has shown it to have been an oversight. Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 574.

^{xxviii} “Unworking” translates Blanchot’s *désœuvrement*, the “downward slope of writing,” the return or reduction of the text to what he calls the “second night” and Emmanuel Levinas the *il y a* or “there is,” the given, alterity (“otherness”). There remains the possibility that the *il y a* or alterity is itself only the latest version of the metaphysical quest for an absolute. Cf, Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing...*, op. cit. p. 64ff.

^{xxix} The phrase is taken from a posthumously published poem in Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, edited by Holly Stevens (Vintage, New York, 1967) p.366. The full lines read: “At the Antipodes of Poetry, dark winter,/ When the trees glisten with that which despoils them;” quoted in Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, op. cit. p.66.

^{xxx} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 402.

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, p. 402.

^{xxxii} Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, op cit. p.88. Critchley, a generous companion for the philosophically challenged cannot escape his native English “Dismalism,” evidenced in the title of his previous volume, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, where he develops the philosophical argument for his “realist” interpretation of Stevens. He describes the American poet as a “dejected transcendental idealist” since a post-Kantian realizes he can say nothing about things-in-themselves, resulting in both Stevens’ and Beckett’s taciturnity. Critchley cites as a paragon of poetic humility in the face of the “other” the prose poems of Francois Ponge’s, *Le parti pris des choses*, *On the Side of Things* (1942).

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 530.

^{xxxiv} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 554.

^{xxxv} Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, op. cit. p. 164. This formulation approaches scientific positivism or empirical realism which assumes a correspondence or Thomistic *adequatio* between words and things and hence the existence of “givens.” The “language of facts” would appear to be at best an impoverished prose or more accurately silence since facts and language are incommensurably, unless one accepts with Vico that facts > L. *factus* made, are made not found in reality.

^{xxxvi} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 428.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 406.

^{xxxviii} In contrast, a contemporary physicist might describe the universe as an amorphous, non-homogeneous, interdependent energy field oozing energy and entropy as the universe flies apart at an ever greater velocity. The most contested issue between neural science and cognitive philosophy today is whether the distinction between objective and subjective is supportable or

simply an artifact of the antiquated mind-body dichotomy and neurophysiology's comparatively undeveloped understanding of the mechanisms producing consciousness.

^{xxxix} Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, op. cit. p.140.

^{xl} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 513.

^{xli} Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, op. cit. p. 65.

^{xlii} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 429.

^{xliii} *Ibid.*, p. 429.

^{xliv} Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1977), pp.403-405. For Bloom the poet shifts his identity from himself to his images, a self-loss he relates to Freud's *thanatos* or "death-wish" and the Romantic *Liebestod* or death-in-love. Here, however, the image with which Stevens identifies is the angel of metaphor and hence an image of his own imagination. Bloom hypothesizes a second kind of identification that of a poet with this poetic vocation which he calls the "crossing of election" which he illustrates with a helpful distinction between the "organic ego" or "personhood," which "abstracts" or rebels against the real, an "infant Prometheus" and the "creative ego" or "poetude," an "adult Prometheus" which by identifying with his poetic power transforms the "real." Since the poet is can never identify with reality but only his image of it, indeed his construction of it into an idea or fiction, the difference between the crossings of election and identification may be chimerical.

^{xl} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 36,137. The sea has no self until she makes it a metaphor for some aspect of *her* self, as it is here (and in "Notes," A:VIII) a metaphor for Stevens for reality, that which cannot be imagined or said only shaped into song.

^{xli} "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" has a distinguished genealogy of responses to the demand for "poetic realism," e.g., Sir Philip Sydney's *Defence of Poesie* (1580), John Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668) and most immediately Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (written in 1821 but only published posthumously 1840.)

^{xlii} Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, op. cit. p. 23.

^{xliii} The emergence of a post-epistemological perspectives was first manifested at Cambridge by Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) shift from the logical "truth value" of the *Tractatus* (1921) to the "language games" or "forms of life" in his *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously in 1953.) Meanwhile, at Oxford, J. L. Austin (1911-1960) was reconceiving linguistics in terms of speech acts or "performative utterances" rather than declarative statements in *How to Do Things With Language* (published posthumously in 1962.) Charles Taylor's (1931 -) influential article "Overcoming Epistemology" in his *Philosophical Arguments*, (1995) opposed the "naturalist foundationalism" of Cartesian science's "myth of the given" and substituted a "constructivist" epistemology, situated or embodied in social practice (interpretative or hermeneutic systemes.) A Continental analog for the distinction between epistemology and post-epistemology might be Heidegger's "present-to-hand" (science's ontic or constituted being) and "ready-to-hand" (ontological of constituting being of *Dasein*, human being-in-the-world.) Post-epistemology could be seen as only the latest chapter in philosophy's

500-year struggle to maintain a role for itself in the face of an ascendant, now hegemonic scientific positivism.

^{xlix} It is perhaps apocryphal that Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), asked on her deathbed by an acolyte, “Miss Stein, what is the answer?” replied “What is the question?”

^l Hegel called the “second spiritualization of the artwork,” after its initial “spiritualization” or imagination by the artist.

^{li} Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, op. cit. p. 139.

^{lii} This argument ironically combines both Epicurus’ reason for *ataraxia*, lack of worry about death and Heidegger’s for *Angst*, the omnipresent worry about death.

^{liii} Steven’s position should be distinguished from the radical subjectivism or subjective idealism usually associated with Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753.) For example, in the first poem in this selection, “Domination of Black,” Stevens does not claim that hemlocks are black instead of green, only that at dusk they appear to turn dark, turning them into a trope (or verbal turning) for death.

^{liv} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 418.

^{lv} Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, op. cit. pg. 25.

^{lvi} *Ibid.*, p. 61.

^{lvii} *Ibid.*, p.85; cf. pp.52-55,88.

^{lviii} The idea of the world as originating from a primal sound or singularity can be found across cosmologies, (possibly because these were written or chanted by priests;) e.g. the *Logos* of Genesis, Pythagoras’ “music of the spheres” and the Vedic Om (the tri-syllable AUM > Sans. egg, yeast and yes.)

^{lix} Stevens, *Collected Poems*, op. cit. p. 500.

^{lx} *Ibid.*, p. 254.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The brevity of the list of sources below reveals something which will be evident to users of this site: these poems ideally should have been annotated by an academic literary critic or philosopher who had devoted a lifetime to Stevens work – not a dilettante and autodidact, unfamiliar with much of the poet’s writings, to say nothing of the half-century of critical literature it has elicited. That they were not can likely be attributed to the tedium of explaining every line of each poem so it can be read without reference to others or to outside sources. Since these meanings would already be evident to any Stevens scholar, they have employed their energies to the more challenging task of producing a steady stream of critical studies applying the most recent hermeneutic innovations to an exegesis of Stevens’ oeuvre. This literature by its very abundance and theoretic rigor does not, however, provide the most practical apparatus for a line-by-line analysis of Stevens’ poems by the lay reader. Some of these theoretical approaches and larger critical cruxes are briefly, if superficially, adumbrated in the notes accompanying these texts but they cannot compensate for the thoroughness of these scholars’ tireless lucubrations. In particular, as will become clear, they have been written in on-going “conversation,” not without disagreements, with the path-breaking work of Harold Bloom and Simon Critchley. Since these notes are intended to be self-contained, sources are cited but not footnoted and cross-references are limited to the poems in this very limited collection.

Wallace Stevens: Bloom’s Major Poets, edited by Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, Bromall PA, 2003)

Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1977)

Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Routledge, London and New York, 2006)

Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature*, revised edition (Routledge, London and New York, 2004)

Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, corrected edition, edited by John N. Serio and Chris Beyers (Vintage Books, New York, 2015)

Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (Knopf, New York, 1951)

Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, revised, enlarged and corrected edition, edited by Milton J. Bates (Knopf, New York, 1989)

Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1969)

DOMINATION OF BLACK



3

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding –
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

5



10

The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
In the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.
I heard them cry – the peacocks.

15



Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

20



25



Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks.
I felt afraid –
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

30



35



THE SNOW MAN

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

NUANCES OF A THEME BY WILLIAMS

It's a strange courage
you give me, ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
towards which you lend no part!

I
Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

II
Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light.
Be not chimera of morning,
Half-man, half-star.
Be not an intelligence,



5

10



5



Like a widow's bird
Or an old horse.

10



THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM



Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

5



Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

10

15



SUNDAY MORNING



5

6

I
Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

5

10

15



II

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

5

10

15

III

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

5

10

15

IV

She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"

5

There is not any haunt of prophecy,
 Nor any old chimera of the grave,
 Neither the golden underground, nor isle
 Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
 Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
 Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
 As April's green endures; or will endure
 Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
 Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
 By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

10

15



V

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
 The need of some imperishable bliss."
 Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
 Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
 And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
 Of sure obliteration on our paths,
 The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
 Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
 Whispered a little out of tenderness,
 She makes the willow shiver in the sun
 For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
 Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
 She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
 On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
 And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

5

10

15



7
8



9

VI

Is there no change of death in paradise?
 Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
 Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
 Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
 With rivers like our own that seek for seas
 They never find, the same receding shores
 That never touch with inarticulate pang?
 Why set the pear upon those river-banks
 Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
 Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
 The silken weavings of our afternoons,
 And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!

5

10



10

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
 Within whose burning bosom we devise
 Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

15



VII

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
 Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
 Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
 Not as a god, but as a god might be,
 Naked among them, like a savage source.
 Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
 Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
 And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
 The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
 The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
 That choir among themselves long afterward.
 They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
 Of men that perish and of summer morn.
 And whence they came and whither they shall go
 The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

5

10

15



11



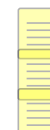
VIII

She hears, upon that water without sound,
 A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
 Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
 It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
 We live in an old chaos of the sun,
 Or old dependency of day and night,
 Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
 Of that wide water, inescapable.
 Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
 Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
 Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
 And, in the isolation of the sky,
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

5

10

15



ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

5

10

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.



V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.



VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.



VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?



VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.



IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.



X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.



XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.



XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.



XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.



NOMAD EXQUISITE

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green vine angering for life,



As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth hymn and hymn
From the beholder,
Beholding all these green sides
And gold sides of green sides,

5



And blessed mornings,
Meet for the eye of the young alligator,
And lightning colors
So, in me, comes flinging
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.

10



THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

5

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

10

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

15

20

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

25

30

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world

35

In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

40



12



Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
 Why, when the singing ended and we turned
 Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

45



13



Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
 The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
 And of ourselves and of our origins,
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

50



55



THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

14



How does one stand
 To behold the sublime,
 To confront the mockers,
 The mickey mockers
 And plated pairs?

5



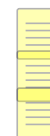
When General Jackson
 Posed for his statue
 He knew how one feels.
 Shall a man go barefoot
 Blinking and blank?

10



But how does one feel?
 One grows used to the weather,
 The landscape and that;
 And the sublime comes down
 To the spirit itself,

15



The spirit and the space,
The empty space
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat?

20



ANGLAIS MORT A FLORENCE

A little less returned for him each spring.
Music began to fail him. Brahms, although
His dark familiar, often walked apart.

His spirit grew uncertain of delight,
Certain of its uncertainty, in which
The dark companion left him unconsolated

For a self returning mostly memory.
Only last year he said that the naked moon
Was not the moon he used to see, to feel

(In the pale coherences of moon and mood
When he was young), naked and alien,
More leanly shining from a lankier sky.

Its ruddy pallor had grown cadaverous.
He used his reason, exercised his will,
Turning in time to Brahms as alternate

In speech. He was that music and himself.
They were particles of order, a single majesty;
But he remembered the time when he stood alone.

He stood at last by God's help and the police:
But he remembered the time when he stood alone.
He yielded himself to that single majesty;

But he remembered the time when he stood alone,
When to be and delight to be seemed to be one,
Before the colors deepened and grew small.

5

10

15

20



POSTCARD FROM THE VOLCANO

Children picking up our bones
Will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill;

And that in autumn, when the grapes
Made sharp air sharper by their smell,
These had a being, breathing frost;

And least will guess that with our bones
We left much more, left what still is
The look of things, left what we felt

At what we saw. The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky

Cries out a literate despair.
We knew for long the mansion's look
And what we said of it became

A part of what it is. Children,
Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know,

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world,
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
Smeared with the gold of the opulent sun.

THE POEMS OF OUR CLIMATE

I
Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.



15



5

10

15

20

5

Pink and white carnations — one desires
 So much more than that. The day itself
 Is simplified: a bowl of white,
 Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
 With nothing more than the carnations there.

10



II

Say even that this complete simplicity
 Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
 The evilly compounded, vital I
 And made it fresh in a world of white,
 A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
 Still one would want more, one would need more,
 More than a world of white and snowy scents.

15



III

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
 So that one would want to escape, come back
 To what had been so long composed.
 The imperfect is our paradise.
 Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
 Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
 Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

20



THE MAN ON THE DUMP

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
 The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
 Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho . The dump is full
 Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
 The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
 And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
 Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
 The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
 From Esthonia: the tiger chest for tea.

5



16

The freshness of night has been fresh a long time.
 The freshness of morning, the blowing of day, one says
 That it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads, it puffs
 More than, less than or it puffs like this or that.
 The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green
 Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea

10



15

On a cocoanut—how many men have copied dew
 For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
 With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
 Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
 One grows to hate these things except on the dump.

20



Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
 Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
 Between that disgust and this, between the things
 That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
 And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
 One feels the purifying change. One rejects
 The trash.

25



That's the moment when the moon creeps up
 To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
 One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
 Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
 (All its images are in the dump) and you see
 As a man (not like an image of a man),
 You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

30



One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
 One beats and beats for that which one believes.
 That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
 Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
 To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
 Peck the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
 Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,
 Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds
 On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
 Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
 Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
 The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.

35



40



45



CONNOISSEUR OF CHAOS

I

A. A violent order is a disorder; and
B. A great disorder is an order. These
Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.)

II

If all the green of spring was blue, and it is;
If all the flowers of South Africa were bright
On the tables of Connecticut, and they are;
If Englishmen lived without tea in Ceylon, and they do;
And if it all went on in an orderly way,
And it does; a law of inherent opposites,
Of essential unity, is as pleasant as port,
As pleasant as the brush-strokes of a bough,
An upper, particular bough in, say, Marchand.

III

After all the pretty contrast of life and death
Proves that these opposite things partake of one,
At least that was the theory, when bishops' books
Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that.
The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind,
If one may say so. And yet relation appears,
A small relation expanding like the shade
Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill.

IV

A. Well, an old order is a violent one.
This proves nothing. Just one more truth, one more
Element in the immense disorder of truths.
B. It is April as I write. The wind
Is blowing after days of constant rain.
All this, of course, will come to summer soon.
But suppose the disorder of truths should ever come
To an order, most Plantagenet, most fixed...
A great disorder is an order. Now, A
And B are not like statuary, posed
For a vista in the Louvre. They are things chalked
On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see.



18



5

10

15

20

25

30

V

The pensive man... He sees the eagle float
For which the intricate Alps are a single nest.



OF MODERN POETRY



19

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.



Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.



5

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage,
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.



10



15



20



It must
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.



25

NOTES TOWARDS A SUPREME FICTION

To Henry Church

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transperence that you bring is peace.

It Must Be Abstract

I
Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images.

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There is a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.



20



5



5



21

10



22

15



20



II

It is the celestial ennui of apartments
That sends us back to the first idea, the quick
Of this invention; and yet so poisonous



Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to
The truth itself, the first idea becomes
The hermit in a poet's metaphors,

5



Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day.
May there be an ennui of the first idea?
What else, prodigious scholar, should there be?



The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher
Appoints man's place in music, say, today.
Bur the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

10



And not to have is the beginning of desire.
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.
It is desire at the end of winter, when

15



It observes the effortless weather turning blue
And sees the myosotis on its bush.
Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn.



It knows that what it has is what is not
And throws it away like a thing of another time,
As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.

20



III

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea . It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning



And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
From that ever-early candor to its late plural

5



And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought



Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
That gives a candid kind to everything.

10



We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
Inscribes a primitive astronomy

15



Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
And throws his stars around the floor. By day
The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo



And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.

20



IV

The first idea was not our own. Adam
In Eden was the father of Descartes
And Eve made air the mirror of herself,



Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;
And in the earth itself they found a green —

5



The inhabitants of a very varnished green.
But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
In imitation. The clouds preceded us.



There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.

10



From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

15



We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues.
The air is not a mirror but bare board,
Coulisse bright-dark, tragic chiaroscuro



And comic color of the rose, in which
 Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips
 Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them.

20



V
 The lion roars at the enraging desert,
 Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise,
 Defies red emptiness to evolve his match,

24



Master by foot and jaws and by the mane,
 Most supple challenger. The elephant
 Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blaes,

5



The glitter-goes on surfaces of tanks,
 Shattering velvetest far-away. The bear,
 The ponderous cinnamon, snarls in his mountain



At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow.
 But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,
 Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

10



In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner
 Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press
 A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

15

Yet voluble of dumb violence. You look
 Across the roofs as sigil and as ward
 And in your centre mark them and are cowed.



These are the heroic children whom time breeds
 Against the first idea — to lash the lion,
 Caparison elephants, teach bears to juggle.

20



VI
 Not to be realized because not to
 Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because
 Not to be realized. Weather by Franz Hals,

25



Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds,
 Wetted by blue, colder for white. Not to

5



Be spoken to, without a roof, without



First fruits, without the virginal of birds,
The dark-blown ceinture loosened, not relinquished.
Gay is, gay was, the gay forsythia



And yellow, yellow thins the Northern blue.
Without a name and nothing to be desired,
If only imagined but imagined well.

10



My house has changed a little in the sun.
The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,
False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin.

15



It must be visible or invisible,
Invisible or visible or both:
A seeing and unseeing in the eye.



The weather and the giant of the weather,
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.

20



VII
It feels good as it is without the giant,
A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,



26

A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica, a stop to watch
A definition growing certain and

5



A wait within that certainty, a rest
In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake.
Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,



As when the cocks crows on the left and all
Is well, incalculable balances,
At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes

10



And a familiar music of the machine
Sets up its Schwarmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen,

15



As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which



We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist.

20



VIII

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc,
And see the MacCullough there as major man?



The first idea is an imagined thing.
The pensive giant prone in violet space
May be the MacCullough, an expedient,

5



Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,
Incipit and a form to speak the word
And every latent double in the word,



Beau linguist. But the MacCullough is MacCullough.
It does not follow that major man is man.
If MacCullough himself lay lounging by the sea,

10



27

Drowned in its washes, reading in the sound,
About the thinker of the first idea,
He might take habit, whether from wave or phrase,

15



Or power of the wave, or deepened speech,
Or a leaner being, moving in on him,
Of greater aptitude and apprehension,



As if the waves at last were never broken,
As if the language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken.

20



IX

The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance
Are parts of apotheosis, appropriate
And of its nature, the idiom thereof.



They differ from reason's click-clack, its applied
Enflashings. But apotheosis is not
The origin of the major man. He comes,

5



Compact in invincible foils, from reason,
Lighted at midnight by the studious eye,
Swaddled in reverie, the object of



The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind,
Hidden from other thoughts, he that reposes
On a breast forever precious for that touch,

10



28



For whom the good of April falls tenderly,
Falls down, the cock-birds calling at the time.
My dame, sing for this person accurate songs.

15



He is and may be but oh! he is, he is,
This foundling of the infected past, so bright,
So moving in the manner of his hand.



Yet look not at his colored eyes. Give him
No names. Dismiss him from your images.
The hot of him is purest in the heart.

20



X

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular,



More fecund as principle than particle,
Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,
In being more than an exception, part,

5



Though an heroic part, of the communal.
The major abstraction is the communal,
The inanimate, difficult visage. Who is it?



What rabbi, grown furious with human wish,
What chieftain, walking by himself, crying
Most miserable, most victorious,

10



Does not see these separate figures one by one,
And yet sees only one, in his old coat,
His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town,

15



Looking for what was, where it used to be?
Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man
In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,



It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

20



It Must Change



I
The old seraph, parcel-gilded, among violets
Inhaled the appointed odor, while the doves
Rose up like phantoms from chronologies.



The Italian girls wore jonquils in their hair
And these the seraph saw, had seen long since,
In the bandeaux of the mothers, would see again.

5



The bees came booming as if they had never gone,
As if hyacinths had never gone. We say
This changes and that changes. Thus the constant



Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths
Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause
In a universe of inconstancy. This means

10



Night-blue is an inconstant thing. The seraph
Is satyr in Saturn, according to his thoughts.
It means the distaste we feel for this withered scene

15



Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,
It is a repetition. The bees come booming
As if — The pigeons clatter in the air.



An erotic perfume, half of the body, half
Of an obvious acid is sure what it intends
And the booming is blunt, not broken in subtleties.

20



II

The President ordains the bee to be
Immortal. The President ordains. But does
The body lift its heavy wing, take up,



Again, an inexhaustible being, rise
Over the loftiest antagonist
To drone the green phrases of its juvenal?

5



Why should the bee recapture a lost blague,
Find a deep echo in a horn and buzz
The bottomless trophy, new hornsman after old?



The President has apples on the table
And barefoot servants round him, who adjust
The curtains to a metaphysical t

10



And the banners of the nation flutter, burst
On the flag-poles in a red-blue dazzle, whack
At the halyards. Why, then, when in golden fury

15



Spring vanishes the scraps of winter, why
Should there be a question of returning or
Of death in memory's dream? Is spring a sleep?



This warmth is for lovers at last accomplishing
Their love, this beginning, not resuming, this
Booming and booming of the new-come bee.

20



III

The great statue of the General Du Puy
Rested immobile, though neighboring catafalques
Bore off the residents of its noble Place.



The right, uplifted foreleg of the horse
Suggested that, at the final funeral,
The music halted and the horse stood still.

5



On Sundays, lawyers in their promenades
Approached this strongly-heightened effigy
To study the past, and doctors, having bathed



Themselves with care, sought out the nerveless frame
Of a suspension, a permanence, so rigid
That it made the General a bit absurd,

10



Changed his true flesh to an inhuman bronze.
There never had been, never could be, such
A man. The lawyers disbelieved, the doctors

15

Said that as keen, illustrious ornament,
As a setting for geraniums, the General,
The very Place Du Puy, in fact, belonged



Among our more vestigial states of mind.
Nothing had happened because nothing had changed.
Yet the General was rubbish in the end.

20



IV

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined



On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

5



Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together



And North and South are an intrinsic couple
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body.

10



In solitude the trumpets of solitude
Are not of another solitude resounding;
A little string speaks for a crowd of voices.

15



The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
The child that touches takes character from the thing,
The body, it touches. The captain and his men



Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.
Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,
Sister and solace, brother and delight.

20



V
On a blue island in a sky-wide water
The wild orange trees continued to bloom and to bear,
Long after the planter's death. A few limes remained,



Where his house had fallen, three scraggy trees weighted
With garbled green. These were the planter's turquoise
And his orange blotches, these were his zero green,

5



A green baked greener in the greenest sun.
These were his beaches, his sea-myrtles in
White sand, his patter of the long sea-slushes.



There was an island beyond him on which rested,
An island to the South, on which rested like
A mountain, a pineapple pungent as Cuban summer.

10



And là-bas, là-bas, the cool bananas grew,
Hung heavily on the great banana tree,
Which pierces clouds and bends on half the world.

15



He thought often of the land from which he came,
How that whole country was a melon, pink
If seen rightly and yet a possible red.



An unaffected man in a negative light
Could not have borne his labor nor have died
Sighing that he should leave the banjo's twang.

20



VI
Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade,
And you, and you, bethou me as you blow,
When in my coppice you behold me be.



Ah, ké! The bloody wren, the felon jay,
Ké-ké, the jug-throated robin pouring out,
Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade.

5

There was such idiot minstrelsy in rain,
So many clappers going without bells,
That these bethous compose a heavenly gong.



One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,
The phrases of a single phrase, ké-ké,
A single text, granite monotony,

10



One sole face, like a photograph of fate,
Glass-blower's destiny, bloodless episcopus,
Eye without lid, mind without any dream —

15



These are of minstrels lacking minstrelsy,
Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale
Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird



Of stone, that never changes. Bethou him, you
And you, bethou him and bethou. It is
A sound like any other. It will end.

20



VII

29

After a lustre of the moon, we say
We have not the need of any paradise,
We have not the need of any seducing hymn.



It is true. Tonight the lilacs magnify
The easy passion, the ever-ready love
Of the lover that lies within us and we breathe

5



An odor evoking nothing, absolute.
We encounter in the dead middle of the night
The purple odor, the abundant bloom.



The lover sighs as for accessible bliss,
Which he can take within him on his breath,
Possess in his heart, conceal and nothing known.

10



For easy passion and ever-ready love
Are of our earthy birth and here and now
And where we live and everywhere we live,

15

As in the top-cloud of a May night-evening,
As in the courage of the ignorant man,
Who changes by book, in the heat of the scholar, who writes

The book, hot for another accessible bliss:
The fluctuations of certainty, the change
Of degrees of perception in the scholar's dark.

20

VIII

On her trip around the world, Nanzia Nunzio
Confronted Ozymandias. She went
Alone and like a vestal long-prepared.

30

I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
And laid it in the sand. As I am, I am
The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.

5

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,
Beyond the burning body that I bear.

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.

10

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
In its own only precious ornament.
Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.

15

Clothe me entire in the final filament,
So that I tremble with such love so known
And myself am precious for your perfecting.

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
Is never naked. A fictive covering
Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

20

IX

The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to
The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.
Does it move to and fro or is it of both



At once? Is it a luminous flittering
Or the concentration of a cloudy day?
Is there a poem that never reaches words

5



And one that chaffers the time away?
Is the poem both peculiar and general?
There's a meditation there, in which there seems



To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or
Not apprehended well. Does the poet
Evade us, as in a senseless element?

10



Evade, this hot, dependent orator,
The spokesman at our bluntest barriers,
Exponent by a form of speech, the speaker

15



Of a speech only a little of the tongue?
It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks.
He tries by a peculiar speech to speak



The peculiar potency of the general,
To compound the imagination's Latin with
The lingua franca et jocundissima.

20



X

A bench was his catalepsy, Theatre
Of Trope. He sat in the park. The water of
The lake was full of artificial things,

31



Like a page of music, like an upper air,
Like a momentary color, in which swans
Were seraphs, were saints, were changing essences.

5



The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
To which the swans curveted, a will to change,
A will to make iris frettings on the blank.



There was a will to change, a necessitous
And present way, a presentation, a kind
Of volatile world, too constant to be denied,

10



The eye of a vagabond in metaphor
That catches our own. The casual is not
Enough. The freshness of transformation is

15



The freshness of a world. It is our own,
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,
And that necessity and that presentation



Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer.
Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose
The suitable amours. Time will write them down.

20



It Must Give Pleasure



32

I
To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times,
To be crested and wear the mane of a multitude
And so, as part, to exult with its great throat,



To speak of joy and to sing of it, borne on
The shoulders of joyous men, to feel the heart
That is the common, the bravest fundament,

5



This is a facile exercise. Jerome
Begot the tubas and the fire-wind strings,
The golden fingers picking dark-blue air:



For companies of voices moving there,
To find of sound the bleakest ancestor,
To find of light a music issuing

10



Whereon it falls in more than sensual mode.
But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
On the image of what we see, to catch from that

15



Irrational moment its unreasoning,
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall



Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
We reason about them with a later reason.

20



II

The blue woman, linked and lacquered, at her window
Did not desire that feathery argentine
Should be cold silver, neither that frothy clouds



Should foam, be foamy waves, should move like them,
Nor that the sexual blossoms should repose
Without their fierce addictions, nor that the heat

5



Of summer, growing fragrant in the night,
Should strengthen her abortive dreams and take
In sleep its natural form. It was enough



For her that she remembered: the argentine
Of spring come to their places in the grape leaves
To cool their ruddy pulses; the frothy clouds

10



Are nothing but frothy clouds; the frothy blooms
Waste without puberty; and afterward,
When the harmonious heat of August pines

15

Enters the room, it drowns and is the night.
It was enough for her that she remembered.
The blue woman looked and from her window named



The corals of the dogwood, cold and clear,
Cold, coldly delineating, being real,
Clear and, except for the eye, without intrusion.

20



III

A lasting visage in a lasting bush,
A face of stone in an unending red,
Red-emerald, red-slitted-blue, a face of slate,



An ancient forehead hung with heavy hair,
The channel slots of rain, the red-rose-red
And weathered and the ruby-water-worn,

5

The vines around the throat, the shapeless lips,
The frown like serpents basking on the brow,
The spent feeling leaving nothing of itself,



Red-in-red repetitions never going
Away, a little rusty, a little rouged,
A little roughened and ruder, a crown

10



The eye could not escape, a red renown
Blowing itself upon the tedious ear.
An effulgence faded, dull cornelian

15



Too venerably used. That might have been.
It might and might have been. But as it was,
A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell



And bade the sheep carouse. Or so they said.
Children in love with them brought early flowers
And scattered them about, no two alike.

20



IV
We reason of these things with later reason
And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.



There was a mystic marriage in Catawba,
At noon it was on the mid-day of the year
Between a great captain and the maiden Bawda.

5



This was their ceremonial hymn: Anon
We loved but would no marriage make. Anon
The one refused the other one to take,

Foreswore the sipping of the marriage wine.
Each must the other take not for his high,
His puissant front nor for her subtle sound,

10



The shoo-shoo-shoo of secret cymbals round.
Each must the other take as sign, short sign
To stop the whirlwind, balk the elements.

15



The great captain loved the ever-hill Catawba
And therefore married Bawda, whom he found there,
And Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun.



They married well because the marriage-place
Was what they loved. It was neither heaven nor hell.
They were love's characters come face to face.

20



V
We drank Meursault, ate lobster Bombay with mango
Chutney. Then the Canon Aspirin declaimed
Of his sister, in what a sensible ecstasy



She lived in her house. She had two daughters, one
Of four, and one of seven, whom she dressed
The way a painter of pauvred color paints.

5



But still she painted them, appropriate to
Their poverty, a gray-blue yellowed out
With ribbon, a rigid statement of them, white,



With Sunday pearls, her widow's gayety.
She hid them under simple names. She held
Them closelier to her by rejecting dreams.

10



The words they spoke were voices that she heard.
She looked at them and saw them as they were
And what she felt fought off the barest phrase.

15



The Canon Aspirin, having said these things,
Reflected, humming an outline of a fugue
Of praise, a conjugation done by choirs.



Yet when her children slept, his sister herself
Demanded of sleep, in the excitements of silence
Only the unmuddled self of sleep, for them.

20



VI
When at long midnight the Canon came to sleep
And normal things had yawned themselves away,
The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,



Beyond which fact could not progress as fact.
Thereon the learning of the man conceived
Once more night's pale illuminations, gold

5



Beneath, far underneath, the surface of
His eye and audible in the mountain of
His ear, the very material of his mind.



So that he was the ascending wings he saw
And moved on them in orbits' outer stars
Descending to the children's bed, on which

10



They lay. Forth then with huge pathetic force
Straight to the utmost crown of night he flew.
The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

15



Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.
He had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice



Between, but of. He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony.

20



VII

He imposes orders as he thinks of them,
As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair.
Next he builds capitols and in their corridors,



Whiter than wax, sonorous, fame as it is,
He establishes statues of reasonable men,
Who surpassed the most literate owl, the most erudite

5



Of elephants. But to impose is not
To discover. To discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,



To discover winter and know it well, to find
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

10



It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

15



Seeming at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,



The fiction of an absolute — Angel,
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound.

20



VIII

33

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violet abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,



34



Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

5



Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less-satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?



35

Is it he or is it I that experience this?
Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

10



No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
And if there is an hour there is a day,

15



There is a month, a year, there is a time
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.



These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?

20



IX

Whistle aloud, too weedy wren. I can
Do all that angels can. I enjoy like them,
Like men besides, like men in light secluded,



Enjoying angels. Whistle, forced bugler,
That bugles for the mate, nearby the nest,
Cock bugler, whistle and bugle and stop just short,

5



Red robin, stop in your preludes, practicing
Mere repetitions. These things at least comprise
An occupation, an exercise, a work,



A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

10



And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

15



And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look



At its spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master.

20



X

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
How is it I find you in difference, see you there
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?



You are familiar yet an aberration.
Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires

5



That I should name you flatly, waste no words,
Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,



Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
You remain the more than natural figure. You
Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational

10



Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
That's it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

15



They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,



Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

20



36

Epilogue



Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,



Patches the moon together in his room
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

5



Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.
They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows or that meet
In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.
But your war ends. And after it you return

10



With six meats and twelve wines or else without To
walk another room... Monsieur and comrade,
The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

15



His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.
And war for war, each has its gallant kind.



How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

20



ANGEL SURROUNDED BY PAYSANS



One of the countrymen:

There is
A welcome at the door to which no one comes?



The angel:

I am the angel of reality,
Seen for a moment standing in the door.



I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore
And live without a tepid aureole,

5



Or stars that follow me, not to attend,
But, of my being and its knowing, part.



I am one of you and being one of you
Is being and knowing what I am and know.

10



Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,



Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone



Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

15



By repetitions of half-meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,



A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in

20



Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?



AN OLD MAN ASLEEP

The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping, now.
A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity.

The self and the earth – your thoughts, your feelings,
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,
The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R.

5

THE PLAIN SENSE OF THINGS

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult to choose the adjective
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

5

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

10

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

15

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires.

20

TO AN OLD PHILOSOPHER IN ROME

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end –

5

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and the mile.

10

How easily the blown banners turn to wings...
Things dark on the horizons of perception,
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

15

The human end is the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. The newsboys muttering
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled...

20

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The source of happiness in the shape of Rome,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape

25

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part of that of which

30

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.
Speak to your pillow as if it was yourself.
Be orator but with an accurate tongue
And without eloquence, O, half-asleep,
Of the pity which is the memorial of this room,

35

38

37

39

So that we feel, in this illuminated large,
The veritable small, so that each of us
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
In yours, master and commiserable man,
Intent on your particles of nether-do,

40

Your dozing in the depths of wakefulness,
In the warmth of your bed, at the edge of your chair, alive
Yet living in two worlds, impenitent
As to one, and, as to one, most penitent,
Impatient for the grandeur that you need

45

In so much misery; and yet finding it
Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,
As in the last drop of the deepest blood,
As it falls from the heart and lies there to be seen,

50

Even as the blood of an empire, it might be,
For a citizen of heaven, though still of Rome.
It is poverty's speech which seeks us out the most.
It is older than the oldest speech of Rome.
This is the tragic accent of the scene.

55

And you – it is you that speak it, without speech,
The loftiest syllables among loftiest things,
The one invulnerable man among
Crude captains, the naked majesty, if you like,
Of bird-nest arches and of rain-stained vaults.

60

The sounds drift in. The buildings are remembered.
The life of the city never lets go, nor do you
Ever want it to. It is part of the life in your room.
Its domes are the architecture of your bed.
The bells keep on repeating solemn names

65

In choruses and choirs of choruses,
Unwilling that mercy should be a mystery
Of silence, that any solitude of sense
Should give you more than their peculiar chords
And reverberations clinging to whisper still.

70

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

75

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words take form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

80

THE POEM THAT TOOK THE PLACE OF A MOUNTAIN

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

5

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

10

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

THE COURSE OF A PARTICULAR

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,
Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

40

The leaves cry... One holds off and merely hears the
cry. It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.
And though one says that one is part of everything,

5



There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.



The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

10



In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.

15



FINAL SOLILOQUY OF THE INTERIOR PARAMOUR



Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.



This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

5



Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.



Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

10



Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one...
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

15



Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.



THE PLANET ON THE TABLE

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
They were of a remembered time
Or of something seen that he liked.

Other makings of the sun
Were waste and welter
And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and the sun were one
And his poems, although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.

5

10

15

THE RIVER OF RIVERS IN CONNECTICUT

There is a great river this side of Stygia
Before one comes to the first black cataracts
And trees that lack the intelligence of trees.

In that river, far this side of Stygia,
The mere flowing of the water is a gaiety,
Flashing and flashing in the sun. On its banks,

No shadow walks. The river is fateful,
Like the last one. But there is no ferryman.
He could not bend against its propelling force.

It is not to be seen beneath the appearances
That tell of it. The steeple at Farmington
Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways.

5

10

It is the third commonness with light and air,
A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction .
Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing,

15



Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore
Of each of the senses; call it, again and again,
The river that flows nowhere, like a sea.



NOT IDEAS ABOUT THE THING BUT THE THING ITSELF



At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.



He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

5

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow...
It would have been outside.



It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier mâché...
The sun was coming from outside.

10



That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

15



Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.



OF MERE BEING

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze decor,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

5

10

41

42

1. Epistemology: An Very Brief Introduction

1.1 A history of epistemology from Antiquity to the present in 1600 words is on its face an act of folly, perhaps impudence, especially when committed by a philosophic dilettante and autodidact. It cannot help but caricature a discipline at the center of the Western philosophical tradition and do a grave disservice to the brilliant minds it has attracted. It might, however, be excused on the grounds it approximated the casual understanding of the subject by a poet like Stevens who had neither the time or inclination to engage its literature in scholarly depth.

Epistemology (Gr. > *epi-* under + *histanai* to stand, place + *logos* word, study) is the study of understanding or theory of knowledge, specifically the relationship between thought and things, appearance and reality, subject and object. As such it is intimately connected with ontology (Gr. > *einai* to be, *ontos* being + *logos* word, study) the theory of being or reality which the Greeks interpreted as the study of origins (Gr. > *arche* source of action.)

In traditional societies, myth, religion and custom provide a priori assumptions which, however imperfectly, are used to explain the phenomena of the natural world through metaphysical (Gr. > *meta-* beyond + *physis* nature,) forces such as the wrath or favor of the gods or the intervention of ancestors. Animism (L. > breath, wind, spirit) conceives natural objects as animated by spirits and therefore be thought of as a kind of paleo-metaphysics. Epistemology only becomes a question when the coherence between a priori ideas or beliefs and observed phenomena is challenged.

1.2 The Pre-Socratics. In the history of the West, such an intellectual crisis first presented itself around periphery of the Greek world, in the colonies of Italy and in Ionia, the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea, during the 6th Century BC with the emergence of the *physiologoi* who argued that physical forces inherent in nature, not the metaphysical whims of the Olympian pantheon of Hesiod and Homer, constituted a material ground-of-being. Thales of Miletus (624-546 BC,) usually credited as the first “natural philosopher,” argued that water was the basis of all natural change, while his student, Anaximenes (585-525 BC,) held that air was more likely responsible for flux. Pythagoras of Samos (582-496 BC) taught that nature was governed by harmonic ratios, the so-called “music of the spheres,” while Heraclitus of Ephesus (535-475 BC) pointed out that change or flux itself was the only unchanging thing and hence the shifting ground-of-being. Empedocles of Agrigento (490-430 BC) was the first to explain the diversity of the visible world in terms of varying combinations of four elements - earth, air, fire and water, a view which dominated Western science and medicine for the next two thousand years. Finally, Democritus of Abdera (460-370 BC) presciently theorized that all matter was comprised of differently shaped, imperishable atoms.

1.3 The Sophists, teachers of rhetoric or public speaking more than philosophers, observed that these disagreements proved that the evidence of the senses was subjective and that truth was therefore a matter of opinion, custom and consensus. Protagoras of Abdera (490-420 BC) famously summed up this moral and epistemological relativism with the aphorism, “Man is the measure of all things.” Since the rise of this natural philosophy coincided with the growth of democracy in the Greek city states, it seemed that truth could be put to a vote with persuasion its standard, not coincidentally, increasing the demand for the Sophists’ services.

1.4 Classical Idealism. The Sophists’ contention that truth was relative and the natural philosophers’ equation of it with the random motion of atoms or continual flux did not sit well with the priests of the various religious mystery cults nor the aristocratic guardians of civic virtue and tradition, to say nothing of rival philosophers who claimed to have special insight into metaphysical realities. One of these, Parmenides of Elea (510-440 BC,) was the first to assert that thought not matter was the ground-of being, the seed of all future idealisms. His follower, Zeno (490-430 BC,) expanded on this idea by declaring the world of sense impressions an illusion on the grounds that its obvious multiplicity contradicted the unity of being which, like Parmenides, he identified with a universal mind.

Plato (427-347 BC) in his dialogues systematized this anti-physicalist offensive in his theory of the Ideas (Gr. > *eidos* image,) eternal, unchanging abstract Forms, resembling those of geometry, the pure products of *Nous* (Gr. > mind, reason, knowledge,) a universal intelligence of which the human mind partook. These ideas or noumena, he argued, constituted the ultimate reality while natural appearances or phenomena were merely their deformed “shadows,” which men mistook for reality. All idealisms, whether theological or philosophical, share the core belief that a priori truths beyond the verification of the sense experience are the ground-of-being. During this same “Axial Age,” Buddha (563-483 BC) also rejected the world of the senses, physical desire and the self itself as illusions (Sans. > *maya*) and the source of all suffering because perishable, thus masking an unconditioned, dimensionless, unchanging ultimate reality (Sans. > *brahman* to be, make firm, generate.)

Aristotle (384-322 BC) attempted to root Plato’s disembodied Ideas in nature through his theory of universal, ideal types or potentials (entelechies,) defined rather circularly as “that which a thing is becoming,” a teleology (Gr. > *telos* goal, end, purpose) immanent in all things but only manifested (instantiated) as particulars, distorted by the “accidents” of its individual development (see note 18.) This model derived from organic nature has been compared with the concept of genotype and phenotype in contemporary genetics.

1.5 The Copernican Turn. The classical idealism of Plato and Aristotle was readily assimilated to Abrahamic monotheism, first by Islamic rationalists such as Al-Farabi (872-950) and Ibn Said or Avicenna (980-1037) and then by medieval Christian Scholasticism where Plato’s ideas and Aristotle’s universals became God’s ideas for the creation of the world such that the mind of the Creator could be read in the “book of nature.” Aquinas (1125-1274) posited a correspondence

(L. > *adequatio* equivalence) between the human mind and observable reality based on their common Creator which provided the epistemological foundation for the medieval consensus or coherence of theology and nature.

Scholastic idealism's concept of the "book of nature" inadvertently renewed interest in the empirical investigation of the physical world. Copernicus (1473-1534) and those who followed him like Galileo (1564-1642) aided by improved, a posteriori, astronomical observations gradually replaced Scholasticism's Ptolemaic, geocentric or theocentric, model of the solar system with a heliocentric one despite the implacable opposition of the Church. The Scientific Revolution's increasing success in describing physical reality undermined idealism's a priori, metaphysical assumptions or and religious faith and revelation precipitating what has been called "the disassociation of sensibility" between subject and object, "the disenchantment of the world," or simply the "the crisis of modernity,"

1.6 German Idealism. Like Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle before them, philosophers, artists and believers responded to this "crisis" by attempting to repair the collapsed epistemological bridge between mind and nature. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a towering figure in the history of epistemology, claimed to have been "woken from his dogmatic slumber" by skeptics like Locke and Hume who argued that causality was nothing but the mind's association of contiguity, frequently occurring events rather than a property of nature. In his path-breaking *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Kant sought to undermine science's claim to speak about ultimate reality (Ger.> *Ding-an-Sich* the thing-in-itself) by arguing that a posteriori, empirical observations and any inductions or hypotheses based on these were inevitably mediated by the a priori, mental categories of perception and cognition, (the "transcendental aesthetic and analytic") including space, time, causality, extension, and therefore not intrinsic to reality. Kant's "transcendental idealism," however, also psychologized the claims of metaphysics and revealed religion as mere opinion and so may have added to the dilemma of skepticism.

Led by the indomitable Friedrich Hegel, (1770-1831) idealist philosophers rushed to rectify this oversight by the simple expedient of inverting Scholasticism's logical God, by making a god of logic. Hegel posited an "Absolute Idea" or *Logos* (Ger.> *Geist* spirit) whose thought process was a logical dialectic which manifested itself as the development of world history, one of the bases for the 19th Century's ideas of progress. Poetry was afforded an elevated insight into ultimate reality by German Idealism because of the central role it ascribed to the "world historic subject" or mind. Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829,) aesthete and a founder of Indo-European linguistics, went so far as to describe the 19th Century as a "great novel" and declared "No poetry, no reality!"

1.7 Romanticism and Aestheticism. In England, Stevens' predecessors, the Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) imbibed the heady brew of German Idealist's, glimpsing this "World Mind" during their jaunts through the English countryside. They intended their poems to rejoin physical and human nature in the "cult of a higher Nature" which would replace now-discredited theologies. Their New World counterparts,

Transcendentalists like Emerson (1803-1882) and Whitman (1819-1892,) saw in the vast, untamed North American continent's "natural sublime" literal raw material waiting to be fully realized by the minds and industry of the new, democratic American.

Nature predictably revealed its indifference to mankind and mankind, newly empowered by the Industrial Revolution, reciprocated in kind, with the result that scientific positivism or empiricism became the dominant ideology of the 19th Century. By its end, only an attenuated idealism disguised in the Aestheticism of Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) and Walter Pater (1839-1894) and the subjectivism of George Santayana (1863-1952), Stevens' own mentor (see note 37) made psychological but no epistemological claims.

1.8 Logical Positivism. Unable to beat science, Anglo-Saxon philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) attempted to turn philosophy into a branch of mathematics, specifically logic; it remains the dominant tendency in American and Britain where it has become allied with the burgeoning field of information science. At Cambridge, the young Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1950) described philosophy as "a disease of language" and its illogical uses, confining its scope to the logical "truth value" of propositions and deductions. Following his lead, logical positivism made the verifiability of statements by empirical observation and direct deduction the test of knowledge which they distinguished from ultimate reality.

1.9 Heidegger and the Neo-Heideggereans. On the Continent, the heirs of Hegel struggled to preserve an ever-shrinking foothold for speculative philosophy from the rising tide of science. Their desperation may be judged by the reckless embrace of National Socialism by their most persuasive and cogent exponent, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976.) He contrasted the merely "ontic" (constituted or categorized) being of scientific observation with the "ontological," given or constituting being, of his own metaphysical creation *Dasein*, (Ger. > *da*- here, there + *sein* to be) "primordial," instinctual human being-towards-the-world.

The Neo-Heideggerean, French Deconstructionists, led by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) could be thought of as updating Kant's critique of science, especially the social sciences, as imbricating (blinking, totalizing, self-referential) discursive "regimes" which functioned as invisible, internalized mechanisms of social control. They were most influential, however, not among other philosophers but American literature and cultural studies faculties who problematized the privileged values and canons of their own disciplines, too often to champion in their stead ahistoric romances of "sub-alterned," pre- and post-modern ideologies.

1.10 Post- or Constructivist Epistemologies. Deconstruction's linguistic nihilism and post-modernism's latent essentialisms inevitably led to what has been called a "return to values" or a "post-epistemological" perspective, focused less on absolute truth and ultimate reality than the assumptions with which truth and reality are constituted or constructed. This perspective was prefigured by the Enlightenment philosopher and historian Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) when he asserted that "facts are not found but made." The modern origin of this shift in focus of

epistemology is usually traced to Cambridge philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein's, (1889-1951) shift from analyzing language in terms of its logical "truth value" (note 1.8) to describing it as mutually-understood "language games" or "forms of life" in his *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953. His views influenced the emergence of "ordinary language" philosophy, sixty miles from Cambridge in Oxford, which argued that meaning cannot be determined without reference to its social context, use or praxis and hence that truths are contingent and relative, a parallel with the ancient Sophists. J. L. Austin (1911-1960) reconceived linguistics in terms of "speech acts" or "performative utterances" rather than declarative statements in *How to Do Things With Language*, also posthumously published in 1962. Charles Taylor's (1931 -) influential article "Overcoming Epistemology" in his *Philosophical Arguments* (1995) opposed the "naturalist foundationalism" of Cartesian science's "myth of the given" and proposed instead a "constructivist" epistemology, where "truth" is situated or embodied in social practice and shared hermeneutic or interpretative assumptions. A Continental analog for the tropism from epistemology to post-epistemology might be found in Heidegger's distinction between the "present-to-hand" (science's ontic or constituted being) and the "ready-to-hand" (ontological or constituting being, such as *Dasein*, human being-in-the-world,) which, importantly, he regarded as a primordial given not historically constructed. Thus in a post-epistemological perspective, meaning is thought of as constructed not found and the world seen as already valorized or privileged, suffused with competing values and purposes on the basis of which meanings and truths are made not found or given. The idea of a fictive (L. > *fingere* to mold, form; *fictus* man-made) truth is the point at which current constructivist epistemologies intersect most directly with Stevens' poetics of an imaginative construct or fiction, as discussed in the introduction to this collection.

2. Dialectic

In the course of these notes, the idea of dialectic appears in multiple contexts to denote a tri-partite method of argument or thought which progresses **1)** by stating a proposition or thesis **2)** posing a contradiction to it or its anti-thesis and **3)** resolving that contradiction with a new, more inclusive thesis or synthesis. The term dialectic originally meant simply to converse or discuss (Gr. > *dia-* across, between + *legein* to speak. Its methodology can be found in both ancient Greek and Vedic thought as the (too) familiar dyad of an active principle, spirit or man (Sans. > *puruhsa*, persona, spirit, awareness) acting on a passive principle, matter or woman (Sans. > *prakriti* matter, nature, pre-created) to produce the concrete, individuated creation. The diagrams below schematize some of the dialectics which have most often been used to analyze Stevens' poetry. When compiled and simplified in this form, they can appear to be "theories of everything and nothing," a kind of mental parlor game which when too rigidly and literally applied, they too easily become.

2.1. Stevens: Abstraction (drawing away from the real into the mind or consciousness)

- > Change (imagination, transformation, infusing with feeling)
- > Pleasure (the final image, fiction, peace)

2.2 Classical Logic: Thesis (proposition)

- > Antithesis (negation)
- > Synthesis (negation of the negation)

2.3 Tropes: Vehicle (the given, real or objective)

- > Tenor (the meaning, affect or subjective)
- > Metaphor (a figure of speech)

2.4 Quintillian's Rhetoric: *Ethos* (Gr.> place, law or facts, givens of the case)

- > *Logos* (Gr.> word, argument, logic; making *your* case)
- > *Pathos* (Gr.> feeling, persuasion, identification)

2.5 Emerson: Nature (fate, necessity, the objective)

- > Freedom (self-Reliance, solitude, the subjective)
- > Power (will, mastery, the transcendental)

2.6 Bloom's Mythopoeia : Limitation (the human given)

- > Organic Ego (personhood, rebellion against limitation)
- > Creative Ego ("poetude," imagination)

2.7 Bloom's Crossings: Crossing of Election (accepting poetic vocation)

- > Crossing of Solipsism (accepting the poet's solitude)
- > Crossing of Identification (accepting death)

2.8 Blake: Beulah (innocence, Garden of Eden)

- > Generation (experience, our world)
- > Jerusalem (city of the imagination, reintegration)
- > *or* Ulro (Hell, rational self-absorption)

2.9 Hegel's Ontology: The Abstract or Absolute (pure being, origin of the being,)

- > The Negative (non-being, nothingness)
- > The Concrete (becoming, history)

2.10 Hegel's Aesthetics: Creation (writing, the author, first spiritualization of the artwork)

- > The Artwork (text, object, the concretized)
- > Reception (second spiritualization, reading)

2.11 Marx: The Bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production, buyers of labor power)

- > The Proletariat (labor power, "wage slaves")
- > Communism (freely associated producers)

2.12 The Christian Trinity: God (the father, the all-creating word)

- > Christ (the son, the word made flesh)
- > Holy Ghost (the indwelling word, grace)

2.13 Epistemology: Transcendental Idealism (metaphysics, positivism)

- > Deconstruction (epistemological and discursive nihilism)
- > Post-Epistemology (constructed meaning)

2.14 Jung: Animus (self, active principle, male, creative)

- > Anima (soul, passive principle, female, created)
- > Psychic Integration (wholeness, unity)

2.15 Freud: Id (libido, the Pleasure Principle, primary energy)

- > Superego (the Reality Principle, survival instinct)
- > Ego (sublimation, constructive work)

3. Tropes: Poetic Motion

3.1 The trope plays a key role in Stevens' poetics as the link between its central dichotomy, reality and mind. The term (Gr. > *tropein* to turn)) is etymologically cognate with tropics, tropism and heliotrope. In rhetoric, tropes are devices which turn one meaning into another, sometimes called "figures of speech" because they are figures or entities made *out of* language and existing only there, verbal constructs which Stevens calls fictions. Common tropes include metaphor, simile, allegory, personification, antanaclasis (homonymns,) metalepsis (note **35.3**) and irony but a grammarian in 1577 listed 184 different types of tropes.

3.2 Metaphor (Gr.> *meta-* across + *pherein* to carry) is a comparison "carried across" from one thing to another based on their similarity. A familiar example might be Jacques' speech in *As You Like It*:

:

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their entrances and exits
And one man in his time plays many parts...
- Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II:VII:42-45

The world is not literally a stage but Shakespeare, as a playwright, notes their resemblances here and elsewhere – their transience, their assigned roles, predestined plot and inevitable final curtain. The physical stage and audience are themselves turned into a *teatrum mundi*, a theatre of the world, just as Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on London's Southbank was intended as a metaphor for the globe. Finally, the stage becomes a metaphor for metaphor itself, the place where one place and time is transformed into another (into diegetic or narrative space/time.)

3.3 In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1937), I. A. Richards divided metaphor into two parts: tenor and vehicle. The tenor is the subject, meaning or feeling to which the vehicle or object's characteristics or qualities are "carried across" or ascribed. In the example above, Shakespeare compares the world, the tenor to a vehicle, a stage, in what becomes an extended metaphor or simile.

In Stevens' poetry, the vehicle is identified with "reality," the particular and concrete, and the tenor with "mind," the general and abstract. The task of the poet or the imagination, to oversimplify, is to infuse the first with the second. Nature, for Stevens, is radically "other" from mankind; it continually assaults consciousness with inchoate sense stimuli, he refers to as the "pressure of reality," which the mind resists by abstracting and transforming them into coherent mental images and ideas, to find relief.

3.4 The angel is Stevens' most frequent symbol for the imagination, a messenger between heaven and earth, mind and reality bearing meaning and feeling to nature and giving reality or concrete expression to abstraction (see note 23.) Stevens sometimes also uses the metaphor of cultivating raw nature or sense stimuli into a garden or earthly Eden of fictive images, turning the earth, "place not our own" into a dwelling of and for subjectivity, an "accessible" and "expressible bliss."

4. Motif: Falling Leaves

4.1 Certain metaphors or motifs recur throughout Stevens' poetry so that the development or oscillation of his poetics can be traced through their shifting use. Images of leaves, especially fallen ones, are frequent metaphors in his verse, perhaps because they have such a long lineage in Western poetry and hence bring with them such rich paratextual associations. One reason for their popularity is that in both English and the Romance languages, the word for leaf (L. > folia) can also mean a page and hence can act as a synecdoche for a book of poetry and a metonym for the poet; connoting both a book's impermanence and its author's mortality. Even without this fortuitous homonym, falling cherry blossoms and maple leaves are as pervasive an image in Japanese poetry where they exemplify the poignancy of the untranslatable *mono no aware*, roughly, the transience of things, and the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, worn and fragile beauty.

4.2 The image of fallen leaves can be traced at least as far back as Virgil who used it to describe the "shades," a metaphor itself for the spirits of the dead, the shadows of their living selves, whom Aeneas, the epic's hero, encounters crowding the banks of the River Styx waiting to be carried across to the Elysian Fields or Limbo to await reincarnation (a metaphoric or metamorphic change in its own right.)

Here all the crowd streams, hurrying to the shores
Women and men, the lifeless bodies of noble heroes,
Boys and unmarried girls, sons laid on the pyre
Before their father's eyes: as many as the leaves
As fall in forests at the first frost of Autumn...

- Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI:311-315

4.3 Dante repeats this metaphor in his *Divine Comedy*, where Virgil, now a "shade" himself, leads the medieval poet across the Styx at the start of their journey through the decidedly less benign Christian underworld which awaits the souls of the damned across the river in Hell:

Even as in autumn leaves detach themselves,
Now one and now another, till their branch
Sees all its stripped off clothing lying on the ground;
So, one by one, the evil seed of Adam
Cast themselves down that river-bank when summoned,
As does a bird lured back by its master's call...

- Dante, *Inferno*, III:112-116

Dante also associates the fallen leaves with the biblical Fall of Man and his expulsion from the eternal summer of Eden into a natural world permeated by the death of autumn and human mortality (to say nothing of fig-leaves.)

4.4 The Protestant Milton then appropriates Dante's image to evoke the hosts of fallen or rebellious angels whom Satan summons to build his anti-Paradise in Hell, Pandemonium, which bears a marked resemblance to the contemporary Baroque Rome of Catholicism. It was from here that Satan launched his attack God's favored creations, Adam and Eve, resulting in the Fall whose result Dante describes.

Natheless, he so endured, till on the beach
Of that enflamed sea, he stood and call'd 300
His Legions, Angel Hosts, who there intrans't
Thick as the Autumnal Leaves which strow the Brooks
In Vallombrosa where th' Etrurian shades
High overarch't imbower; ...

- Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I:299-304

303. Vallombrosa – (It. > *valle* valley + *ombrosa* shaded) an actual valley near Florence in Tuscany, land of the ancient Etruscans and not coincidentally Dante's birthplace. "Etrurian shades" refers both to the shade of the Etrurian trees and the fall of that shade into the brooks in autumn

and the shades of the extinct Etruscan people, known primarily from their images engraved on sarcophagi.

4.5 A more immediate source for Stevens' use of this metaphor was his Romantic predecessor, Shelley's, "Ode to the West Wind" where the poet, mortally wounded by the defeat of his revolutionary hopes in the reaction following the French Revolution, commands the winds to carry the fallen or disregarded "leaves" of his verse to inspire future generations to take up the revolution he could not achieve.

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,
Like wither'd leaves, to quicken a new birth
And by the incantation of this verse

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?
- Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," ll.57-70

Shelley's revision, indeed resuscitation of the image, literal and metaphoric, "turns" a metaphor for defeat into one of triumph, an example of what Stevens' calls a "first idea," an original use of an image which has fallen into cliché.

4.6 This, of course, challenges Stevens to find his a new meaning of his own for this metaphor, which he does near the close of his *Ars Poetica*, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction." Here, without denying the leaves fatal falling, he finds satisfaction in the way each inflects and particularizes its descent, shifting the image's focus from the universal fate of death to the life enjoyed and particularized along the way.

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look
At its spinning its eccentric measure.
- Stevens, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," P:IX:16-19.

The rhyme of pleasure with measure, suggests that the proper measure of a man's life is not its quantity but its quality and alludes to the measure or meter of poetry, which is one way of "making time dance."

4.7 Stevens will later retract this “first idea” or hopeful re-envisioning of the image in his witheringly reductive, late poem, “The Course of a Particular,” where he rejects the metaphor of falling leaves regardless of its connotations, as sentimental anthropomorphizing and an instance of Ruskin’s “Pathetic Fallacy” (see note 40:)

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.
- Stevens, “The Course of a Particular,” ll.10-15

Stevens attempts here to deal a death blow not just to this venerable metaphor but to metaphor and imagination *tout court*, arguing that since everything is a particular no larger meaning or general qualities can be attributed to it except that it will follow the course of every other particular into oblivion where it will concern not even itself (see note 18.)

5. “Sunday Morning:” Critical Perspectives

5.1 Romanticism. “Sunday Morning” was Stevens first extended argument for the redemptive power of imaginative creation and subjective experience and the critical responses to it represent a cross-section of the hermeneutic strategies (interpretative frames) which can be applied across much of his work. Harold Bloom, one of the poet’s most appreciative critics, characterizes him in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977) as a “belated” and reluctant recruit to the “Visionary Company” of English and American Romantic poets and to what he sees as their historic mission: propounding a secular, humanist “religion of art” to heal the epistemological wound inflicted on the Western psyche by the post-Copernican collapse of the medieval coherence of mind and nature, objective and subjective, reflected in the disassociation of religion and philosophy from science. Unlike the English Romantic “nature” poets, Stevens was always scrupulous about denying any connection material or metaphysical between the real and the mental. He gruffly dismissed the incipient vitalism or animism in “Sunday Morning” as “a simple expression of paganism.”

5.2 Marxism. Frank Lentricchia, in *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994) calls “Sunday Morning” “a late Romantic paean to the religion of art,” an already passé version of 19th Century Aestheticism, summarized by Théophile Gautier’s (1811-1872) slogan, “art for art’s sake.” He sees it as an attenuated strain of the Wordsworthian “cult of nature” and German Idealism’s subjectivism, Bloom’s secular humanist faith (not unlike Marxism itself, except for its scientific pretentions.) Lentricchia is critical of Stevens’ poem as offering an escape from the

turbulent political realities of his lifetime – two world wars and the Depression – which poets across the political spectrum, from Eliot to Pound and Auden to Williams believed demanded a more engaged poetics. While Stevens shared similar misgivings about Aestheticism, it was not because it shirked any putative political responsibilities rather because he feared it was “unnatural” and “decadent, basing poetry’s value purely on subjective experience ungrounded in reality.

5.3 Nietzsche. B. J. Legett in *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1992) reads “Sunday Morning” through a different 19th Century lens, Friedrich Nietzsche’s, (1844-1900) Perspectivism, whose emphasize on amoral value systems (“moralities”) could be seen as Aestheticism in heroic guise. Legett sees the chanting men of stanza VII as related to the “overman” (*Uberschensch*) asserting their “will to power,” here their human values in the face of an anomic universe (see note 38.2.)

5.4 Pragmatism and Transcendentalism. David LaGuardia, on the other hand in *Advance on Chaos: Wallace Stevens’ Sanctifying Imagination* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983) attempts to locate Stevens within the context of two 19th Century, American philosophical predecessors: the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and his apparent opposite, the pragmatist, William James (1842-1910.) La Guardia argues that the Spanish American philosopher, George Santayana, (1863-1952) a colleague of James and mentor of Stevens at Harvard, synthesized Emerson’s subjectivism with James’ anti-idealism in an ethics of the aesthetic, reflected in “Sunday Morning” (see note 38.1.)

5.5 Discourse Theory. For Beverly Maeder in *Wallace Stevens’ Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) argues that “Sunday Morning” does not break with metaphysics but merely substitutes an ill-defined animism or vitalism for a Mosaic monotheism, as Stevens himself wryly implied. She finds his retention of terms like “divinity,” “god” and “Paradise” betrays a “mutual imbrication of the physical and divine,” in other words, a closed system where the two terms become self-referential and hence tautological. Her objection translated into dialectical terms would be that Stevens merely inverts (negates or inverts the sub-alterned term) of the orthodox dichotomy, sacred and profane, rather than transcending (negating that negation) in a new metaphor or synthesis, what Stevens’ calls a “first idea.” Meader detects in III:9-11 a hidden, “materialist metaphysic,” a natural cycle (here solar, not water) in which “our blood” returns not to the soil but the sky and the sun, its “savage source.” She hears in the chanting men in VII:4-7 the Derridian muttering of a “circle of deferral,” where “sun,” “chant,” “earth,” “blood” and “sky” are interchangeable terms which do not define but assume an absolute or essence underlying them, and hence a kind of metaphysic which the poem ostensibly rejects. In Frank Lentricchia’s concise formulation, “Steven is a transcendentalist without a transcendental object.”

Bloom might retort that the tenor of the circle of tropes in stanza VII is not a suppressed metaphysic of “solar power” or *elan vital* but the men’s chanting itself, the poetic process of turning or “troping” (his coinage) the energy of nature into their dancing and chanting. In Stevens’ dialectic of the imagination outlined in “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,” the mind instinctively

1) “abstracts” or reacts against the “pressure of reality” by drawing into itself or consciousness where it 2) “changes” or transforms that alien reality into 3) the “pleasure” of an idea, image or “fiction.” The poem’s primary argument for the self-sufficiency of sensual and imaginative experience does not presume or require any underlying or transcendental essence, hence is less pantheism than a hearty aestheticism. Nonetheless, Stevens in VII:9-16 makes an effort to relate or ground a poet’s images and tropes, the particular “motions” and emotions of his mind, in a particular reality, a specific geographic and historic topography, which Bloom calls its *ethos* or place and Stevens’ its “climate” or “occasion,” as he makes explicit in VII:9-16.

6. Gendered Pairs

6.1 The Poet and His Muse. “Sunday Morning” is the first important example of Stevens splitting his poetic persona into male and female alteregos, a framing device in each of the three seminal poems of this collection: the stern preceptor and vacillating woman of this poem; the poet and his muse, the “he” and “she” of “The Idea of Order at Key West;” and the mentor and *ephebe*, a pubescent version of himself, whom Stevens instructs in “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction.” This latter instance is included since it seems unlikely, given Stevens’ familiarity with such classical texts as Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that he was unaware of the homoeroticism inscribed in the relationship between an *ephebe* and his mentor or boon companion, the admired youth or *eromenos*) and the older veteran or *erastes*) In the “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” the poet and his muse attempt to part company, only to recognize the paramour is an aspect of the poet.

The woman in “Sunday Morning” has been variously interpreted as Stevens’ “muse,” Freud’s “unobtainable object of desire” and Jung’s receptive, “female” anima or soul, as distinct from his “creative,” “male” animus or self (note 30.) Since the poem is addressed to a woman, it is reminiscent of what Coleridge termed a “conversation poem,” addressed to a silent, absent or passive interlocutor, for example, Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey” or Sarah Hutchinson in Coleridge’s own “Dejection: An Ode,” although Stevens is a far-more stern and “harassing master” than the two Romantic poets and the woman has the temerity to question Stevens’ thesis. The obvious irony of all these poems is that the poet is, in fact, instructing or trying to convince himself. Thus, the woman in “Sunday Morning” is not a traditional muse, let alone the fulfillment of the poet’s desire, but the personification of the poet’s doubts, the representative of a metaphysical desire which he hopes to exorcise.

6.2 The Fear of Solipsism. One reason Stevens may resort to gendered pairs is to externalize unresolved intra-psychic processes, specifically the solipsistic implications of the imagination as the source of its own pleasure. In courtly romance, for example, Dante and Beatrice or Petrarch and Laura, the idealized love object is simultaneously unobtainable, even unknowable, and consequently free to be a creation of the poet’s imagination. In his dual aspect as creator and creation, writer and reader, the poet is both lover and beloved, Pygmalion and Galatea, violating deeply ingrained taboos against narcissism and auto-eroticism as un(re)productive, anti-social, private gratification. Helen Vendler in *On Extended Wing: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems* (Harvard

University Press, Cambridge, 1969) attributes this gendered splitting to an attempt by Stevens to evade “the solipsism of the voracious male imagination” which consumes a real love object or “other” in its fictional transformations so rapaciously it inevitably finds itself alone. This phenomena is made visible in Picasso’s compulsion to deconstruct his serial muses to turn them into fodder for his “voracious” visual ingenuity.

6.3 Psychic Integration. “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens’ *Ars Poetica*, contains a number of gendered pairs – the Captain and Bawda in C:IV, Nanzia and her absent male counterpart, Nunzio in C:VIII and Canon Aspirin and his dour sister in P:V and VI – who act as metaphors for the “conjugation” of the real and imaginary to give birth to a fiction, by analogy with sexual copulation. In P:VIII, however, Stevens comes to the realization that he and his fictions are one, achieving a temporary psychic integration overcoming the dichotomy, mind and reality, which permits the poem to proceed to its conclusion. There at P:X:14,15,18 in the poem’s final canto, we find the mentor rejuvenated as the *ephebe*, one of the students at the Sorbonne, equipped with the knowledge that “the more than rational distortion/ The fiction that results from feeling... is rational” which will allow him and them to become the poets of the “supreme fiction.” At the same time, the ever-elusive “Fat Girl,” earth, nature or reality, has been internalized as the poet’s “fluent mundo,” the world as spoken by his imagination, “revolving” only in the crystalline stillness of his own consciousness, his mind at peace and the fear of solipsism, at least temporarily, at bay (see notes 32, 36.)

7. Philosophical "Idealism"

7.1 Stevens’ Anti- Metaphysics. In “Sunday Morning,” the woman’s longing for an “imperishable bliss” and the comforts of traditional religion identify her as a crypto “philosophical idealist,” wistfully nostalgic for an *a priori* (assumed, taken-for granted, taken-on-faith) belief in an unchanging “ground of being,” universal order or God, without *a posteriori* verifiability or evidence. Such metaphysical (Gr. > *meta*- beyond + *phusis* nature) belief in a, non-material ultimate “reality” dominated both Eastern and Western religious, mythical and philosophic thought until the scientific revolution of the 16th Century and long thereafter (see note 2.)

Stevens’ great antagonist, like Blake’s in this respect, is Jehovah, the God of Mosaic monotheism, for both poets the prototype of all idealisms and the prime example of “reification,” (see note 22) an idea or creation of man which has been turned into, objectified or reified, a thing with an independent existence. This figure appears in various guises in “Notes” in cantos A:I, A:IV, C:I, C:II, C:III, C:VIII and P:III; Stevens sometimes refers to God as the first, “first idea,” that is the mind’s first attempt to make sense or rather impute sense onto the external world. Stevens generally uses “idea” in its specific or extended philosophical sense which includes any mental construct or conscious event, including perception, cognition, emotion, imagination and valuation.

7.2 An “Accessible Bliss.” “Sunday Morning” can be read as Stevens’ first major argument against idealisms and metaphysics – including here, Stevens’ own residual sense of having lost one. In its place, he champions a “secular humanist” salvation through subjective experience, the mind’s creation of ideas, images and fictions which can “satisfy belief” in place of the more-than-human certainties of idealism, providing at least for a moment mental peace. As Stevens writes in his *Adagia*, a collection of aphorisms, left unpublished at the time of his death: “After one has abandoned belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.”

8. Keats’ “Ode on Melancholy”

Lines VI:13-15 of “Sunday Morning” appear to paraphrase these lines from Keats’ “Ode to Melancholy,” although they contain a subtle difference:

She dwells with beauty – Beauty that must die;
And Joy whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching pleasure night
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips.
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine
- Keats, “Ode to Melancholy,” ll.23-28

25

Keats says that melancholy *not* beauty results from the inevitable transience of beauty and joy not that transience is its source or mother. Nonetheless, ephemerality or evanescence has been an integral part of certain aesthetics of beauty, for example, the elegiac strain running through classical literature, typified by Virgil’s line, “*Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*,” “There are tears in things and whatever is mortal touches the mind,” *Aeneid* I:462 The sentiment also appears in the last lines of Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode,” whose epigraph is taken from Virgil: “To me the meanest flower that blows can give/ Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.” An even more immediate source for Stevens’ associating death with a mother might be Walt Whitman, especially his “carol of death” in section XVI of his Lincoln Elegy, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (see note 29.)

Stevens’ aphorism seems atypically unequivocal, especially since “Sunday Morning” argues that death may be man’s given or fate but beauty, not death, can give life value. The adjective “mystical” implies a metaphysics antithetical to Stevens’ “materialism” and may signal that, in the absence of a systematic aesthetic theory such as in “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,” this is just an intuition, which he seems to abandon in his later work. At the very end of that poem, the idea of “mother earth” does resurface in P:X:9-13 but is transformed in ll.14,15 from our literal origin, both our mothers and nature, to a metaphor, “the more than rational distortion,/The fiction that results from feeling.” In ll.16-21, Stevens is not reincorporated into the earth like Whitman but rather incorporates the earth in himself as his “fluent mundo,” the continually change verbal fiction created inside the crystal of his mind.

9. Motif: Pastoral.

Pastoral poetry, also referred to as “georgics,” eclogues” and “bucolics,” is a recondite, literary genre set in an imaginary, idyllic rural society, Arcadia, populated by poet shepherds and erudite milkmaids – an early example of romanticizing a simpler but largely mythical past. It appears in “Sunday Morning “ as a post-lapsarian (after the fall of man) Eden from which death is not excluded but which is “all of paradise that we shall know,” III:11. Arcadia was, in actuality, a remote hardscrabble region in the northwest of the Greek Peloponnesus. Pastoral conventions were established in the Hellenistic period by Theocritus (ff. 270-260 B.C.) and later adopted by poets as varied as Virgil in his “Eclogues” (c. 40 B.C.), Guarini for his tragi-comedy, “Il Pastor Fido,” (1590) Milton in his elegy, “Lycidas.” (1637) Keats in his “Ode on A Grecian Urn,” (1819) and Mallarme in his “L’apres midi d’un faun” (1865.) English Romantic poetry could be said to have transferred the genre’s faux Mediterranean landscape to the soggy English countryside with no apparent irony or loss to its charms.

One of pastoral’s best known evocations in the visual arts is Poussin’s (1594-1665) painting “Et in Arcadia, Ego,” (two versions, 1627 and 1637) in which three shepherds and an older woman come upon a tomb in a bucolic landscape engraved with the title’s enigmatic inscription, which can be translated either as ” I (death) am also in Arcadia” or “I (the dead man) was also once alive in Arcadia like you,” in either case, a *memento mori* or reminder of death, much as Stevens uses it in sections V and VI. He will have recourse to pastoral at other points in his oeuvre, for example, in “Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction,” the debauched pastoral of C:I, a Bacchanale, also the subject of several paintings by Poussin, the elegy for the planter in C:V and the harvest scene of P:IX. As a convention, Stevens apparently feels uncomfortable using it since it is hardly original; therefore he reinvents pastoral in stanza VII, setting it the pre-historic, hunter-gatherer Neolithic, closer to the underlying “first idea,” mankind’s most basic interaction with nature, here through art.

10. Motif: Text and Textile

Stevens frequently plays off the common etymology of text and textile (L. > *texere* to weave or sew, *textus* woven) to form a metaphor of the imagination weaving a garment which shelters naked consciousness from the sensory assault of cold “reality,” the rigors of a disenchanted “climate” or *ethos*, in a post-Edenic “time of dearth.” (There may even be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Adam and Eve covering their nakedness with fig leaves.) The metaphor appears again in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” when “She,” the poetic muse or imagination, is described as “fluttering its empty sleeves,” l.4 because as the personification of fictions, she is only empty sleeves, only a garment. Indeed, there is no given self to be expressed, only the self the imagination expresses in its in fictions. The motif recurs in “Notes Towards A Supreme

Fiction,” notably at A:X:19,20, where the *ephebe* or future poet of the “supreme fiction” is instructed to cloth modern man, shivering in the tatters of discredited metaphysics, in a “final elegance.” In C:VIII:10,11,16-18, the hapless Nanzia Nunzio, who has “stripped [herself] of any fiction...more naked than nakedness,” asks nature in the form of a tyrant’s stone head, ironically the cause of her impoverishment, to cloth her in “the finest filament so that I...am precious for your perfecting,” rather than from her own.

11. “Anachronistic Modernism”

11.1 The Romance of the Pre-Modern. At the time Stevens wrote “Sunday Morning,” modern artists as diverse as Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, Corbusier, Stravinsky, Bartok, Eliot and Pound, were attracted to what they regarded as the more “real” and “healthy” art of “primitive” or pre-modern peoples. (They also privileged the arts of children and the insane or “outsider artists.”) The sculpture of Africa and Polynesia, Iberian cave painting, Russian and Hungarian folksong, even highly refined Japanese woodblock prints, all seemed to offer alternatives to a “decadent” European culture which many blamed for the catastrophe of World War I. This tendency, sometimes called “anachronistic modernism,” did not engage non-European artistic traditions in their ethnographic context rather it selected only those stylistic traits which would free these artists from the conventions of their own tradition, notably realism and perspective in art and tonality in music. This opened the way from modern abstract art which could not have been further from the highly specific cultural and religious functions of the art which purportedly inspired it.

This continent-wide sense of decline was prepared by 19th Century “theories of progress” such as “social Darwinism” and Marxist “historical materialism” which applied notions like “historical inevitability” and “the survival of the fittest” from the evolution of species to civilizations, ethnic groups and individuals. Nietzsche, for example, proposed the “myth of the eternal return,” an ineluctable cycle of world-historic ideas (“moralities” or “transvaluations”) arising with barbarous vigor and confidence, only to decline in turn into self-doubt, nihilism and decadence. The perceived “values vacuum” in post-World War I Europe led to calls for a “return to order” across the arts and social sciences, given new urgency by such influential and alarmist tomes as Oswald Spengler’s (1880-1936) *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* or *The Decline of the West* (1922.)

11.2 Modernism Against Itself. Stevens’ circle of chanting troglodytes in “Sunday Morning,” VII may have its own nativist roots in Whitman’s democratic “roughs,” Cooper’s frontiersmen and Emerson’s “ever-future American” or “Central Man,” free of the epicene taint of European history. Both B. J. Leggett and Frank Lentricchia (see notes 5.2 and 5.3) see Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* or “over-man,” fairly or not often associated with Hitler’s master race, lurking among Stevens’ chanting men. Although this mood of cultural uncertainty and the romance of

pre-industrial societies was exploited to catastrophic effect by the Fascist regimes which arose in the chaos following World War I, Stevens' poetic agenda was the rejuvenation and redemption of mankind through aesthetic experience, specifically poetry, not bloodlust, sun worship, eugenics or racial purity. This is not to say that he was any less reactionary or racist than other members of his class and time (see note 24) only that he did not pursue his political prejudices through his poetics as did many writers of the Right and Left. We are once again in a period of widespread cultural anxiety evidenced by the rise of revanchiste, identity politics in both minority and majority demographics. The French, as is their wont, have coined a word *le déclinisme* to denote this sense of the loss of traditional values and social fission without their replacement by credible, alternatives for the future. (see note 42.4.)

12. Motif : Night and Sleep

12.1 The Fear of Solipsism. Stevens' realization in ll.41,42 that, for "She" or the imagination, "There never was a world for her/Except the one she sang, and, singing, made," describes a condition very similar to solipsism. Robert Rehder points out in *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (The Macmillan Press, London, 1988) that Stevens reacts almost as a reflex to any suggestion of a subjective pleasure cut-off from reality by immediately qualifying such an inference by returning to reality and a critical distance. Here this takes the form of the return to the shore in l.44 and his persona as a critic interrogating Ramon Fernandez, another critic, about how it is possible for her song to seem to transform the town and the ships at anchor, that is have a subjective effect beyond its text. It is significant that the time of day has shifted to evening, not coincidentally the time when Stevens' pursued his "guilty pleasure" or writing poetry. He tends to associate night with subjectivity and to distrust it because in the dark the "Pleasure Principle" can slip free of the grip of the "Reality Principle," represented by the visible, and the "thinker of the first idea" take solitary flights of fancy untethered to his base in the real.

In "Notes," Stevens satirizes the folly of ungrounded speculation in the figure of the Arabian astrologer casting horoscopes at night in canto A:III, just as in "The Man on the Dump" he heaps scorn on Romanticism's "lunacy," its attraction to clichés flitting through the pale, reflected glow of moonlight. In the cold morning of Stevens reductive realism in his last published poem, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," Stevens similarly rejects "the vast ventriloquism of sleep's faded *papier-mache*," indicting dreams and, by extension, poems for counterfeiting "reality" with a puppet show whose true voice is the imagination's. In this, he shared Coleridge's distrust of "Fancy" as the "slippery slope" of solipsism, leading in Stevens' case not to the opium-induced addiction of "Kubla Khan" but a self-intoxication with his own eloquence and disdain for the mundane world around him.

12.2 Imaginative Self-Sufficiency. Stevens' vindication of the imagination in the peroration of "The Idea of Order at Key West" represents the overcoming of his usual ambivalence and inhibitions concerning imaginative pleasure as somehow frivolous and self-indulgent. Perhaps this is why, he affirms the subject's "blessed rage for order" in terms of an *agon* or struggle against the encroaching, inchoate power of night itself, thereby distancing the imagination from its usual negative associations.

...tell why the glassy lights...
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.
"The Idea of Order at Key West," ll. 45,48-50

Similarly, night is the setting for Stevens affirmation of the self-redemptive power of poetry at the culmination of his *Ars Poetica*, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction." In canto P:VI, Canon Aspirin, one of Stevens numerous heteronyms, "at long midnight," transformed into the angel of imagination or metaphor, lifts the Plain Jane sense perceptions of his impoverished nieces to the furthest regions of abstraction, where they become dreams or fictions. Two cantos later in P:VIII, this angel, about to be openly identified with Stevens, leaps through "evening's revelations" and the "lapis-haunted air" to "pluck abysmal glory" and an "accessible bliss," and discovering that "majesty is a mirror of the self," another moment of imaginative self-sufficiency. Then in the concluding canto P:X, Stevens, now rejuvenated as one of the student poets at the Sorbonne, returns "at twilight" from the lecture — which has been the poem itself — realizing that "the irrational (in the sense of unreal or fictional) is rational," prepared to compose the "supreme fiction. Thus for Stevens, in contrast with Blanchot, night does not reduce the poet to silence and *désœuvrement* but mastery and self-recognition (see note 20. 4.)

13. Ramon Fernandez

13.1 Who Was Ramon Fernandez? When once asked why he chose the name Ramon Fernandez, Stevens disingenuously replied that it was so common it could stand for anyone. We know, however, that Stevens read literary magazines in which this Mexican-born, French critic's widely-circulated formalist aesthetics were published approvingly, for example, in Eliot's *Criterion*. A more credible motive for Stevens' reticence about Fernandez might be that between the poem's publication in 1936 and his explanation, the man had died a month before Allied troops reached Paris in August 1944. His death was rumored to have been a suicide so he could escape punishment for his prominent position in the *Parti populaire français*, home-grown French Fascists who collaborated with the occupying Nazi forces. Stevens may well have felt that Fernandez's political trajectory might add an unwanted and unintended subtext to his poem and that his critical theories would needlessly entangle his own poetics in a sterile academic debate.

13.2 The New Criticism. Indeed, Eliot and Fernandez's formalist aesthetics were already firmly ensconced much closer to Hartford than Paris, at Yale University in nearby New Haven, as the New Criticism or New Formalism, the most influential school of poetic exegesis at the mid-century. As theorized by the Czech formalist, Rene Wellek and elaborated by W.K. Wimsatt and Aubrey Beardsley, the New Criticism eschewed the "Intentional" and "Affective Fallacies," thereby expunging subjectivity, both the author's intention and the reader's response, in the name of a depersonalized hermeneutics or method of interpretation. In his influential study, *The Verbal Icon* (University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, 1954,) Wimsatt articulated the idea of the poem as a verbal mechanism, a network of resonating meanings, with an objective existence free of subjectivity. The credo of the New Critics was encapsulated in the closing lines of Archibald MacLeish's poem, "Ars Poetica," (1926): "A poem should not mean/But be."

13.3 Stevens Anti-Formalism. This idea of the poem as an automaton or icon is reminiscent of the mechanical, gold-feathered bird in Stevens "death poem," "Of Mere Being" (1955) itself an allusion to a similar automaton in Yeats' "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium" (see note 41.) In his final poem, Stevens criticizes that bird's song as lacking "human meaning and feeling" which could be seen as continuing his critique of a formalist poetics which sought to expunge both obliquely joined by the reference to Fernandez in 1936. For Stevens, poems never "merely are" but exist within the subjectivity of both the poet and his readers, infused with intentionality and affect, an act of creation by their authors, re-enacted by their readers in what Hegel's termed the first and second "spiritualizations" of the artwork. For Stevens it is crucial that a poem is grounded in the reality of its author's and reader's time and place, that it be their intentional response to it or "the cry of its occasion." Equally, the success of a poem is judged by its ability to "satisfy belief," to create a fiction out of chaos which will give the mind rest and peace.

14. On The Sublime

14.1 The "Natural Sublime." The concept of the sublime was first codified in Western literature in a book on rhetoric from the 1st Century AD, *On the Sublime* (Gr. > *Peri Hypsous*) attributed to pseudo-Longinus because its actual author remains a mystery. This dry tome appealed to the Romantic sensibility because it characterized the sublime as a loss of rationality, a bewilderment and awe before the inconceivable power of nature or the gods. Longinus explicitly states that its unique function in rhetoric was "not to persuade but transport" the listener to a state of ecstasy. 18th and 19th Century aesthetic theories similarly distinguished the "beautiful" from the "sublime" on the grounds that it did not aim to produce pleasure by revealing a higher order but awe by overwhelming the senses and intellect.

The “American Sublime” refers specifically to a genre of 19th Century American landscape painting, exemplified by Thomas Cole and Frederick Church of the Hudson River School, which saw in the vast, untamed scenery of the American continent glimpses of an ultimate reality hidden in Europe under layers of civilization. Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau attributed spiritual uplift to such displays of nature’s raw power, while European Romantics also turned to the “natural sublime” for a direct apprehension of the absolute. For example, in Shelley’s poem “Mt. Blanc” is a symbol of the indifferent “power of necessity” while in Wordsworth’s “Snowden Apocalypse” it reveals a World Mind “flowing through all things.”

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power,
- *The Prelude*, XIV, ll.70-75

14.2 Sublimation. In physics, “sublimation” refers to a state change from a solid directly to a gas without passing through a liquid phase, for example, frost. Stevens, however, uses it as a metaphor or the transformation of material nature into immaterial thought, for example, the vehicle could be thought of as “vaporized” into its tenor. In “Sunday Morning” VII:15, dew is a metaphor for life itself and a memento mori, while in “The Man on the Dump,” it is the quintessential cliché for a sham transcendence. In Freudian psychology, the term refers to the deflection and displacement of so-called “destructive” or forbidden libidinal urges into socially acceptable forms such as art. This concept may inform critic, Harold Bloom’s Kabbalistic theory that Romantic poets confront a “Crossing of Election” from the immature rebellion against libidinal limitation by the personal “organic ego” to the channeling of that energy into a constructive, mature (sublimated) poetic “creative ego” which identifies with its poetic vocation.

15. Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

15.1 It is tempting to read “The Poems of Our Climate” as a rewriting of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” since both employ a vase as the occasion to compare life with a work of art. Keats’ ode plays on the paradox that art is dead but eternal and men alive but mortal, at first appearing to illustrate the classical saw, *ars longa, vita brevis*. In the passage below, for example, he puns on “brede of marble men and maidens overwrought” where brede means both a breed or generation of men as well as a frieze circling the urn and overwrought, both passionate and engraved in marble. The “lesson” of this “Cold Pastoral,” another pun on pastoral poetry and a

sermon, is that art is a monument to man's mortality, a funeral urn testifying to the vanished lives it portrays and who portrayed it.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral! 45
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,--that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' 50
- Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," ll. 41-50

Keats' next ode, "The Ode to Melancholy" generalizes this "lesson" so that beauty is ineluctably suffused with melancholy, an elegiac sense of its own inevitable transience and the ephemerality of any aesthetic experience, marked in the case of the urn by the absence of the artist who first had it.

15.2 The Imperfection of Perfection. In "The Poems of Our Climate" the vase inscribes not the absence of a long-dead world depicted on it but the living world around it and the poet. The "Cold Pastoral" or homily of this exquisite poetic ikebana is that the imagination does not seek an abstract perfection (or, one presumes, a supreme fiction) because that would spell the end of poetry. Stevens confronts here a central question of his poetics: how a trace of the "real" can be retained in an imaginative, conscience construct or "fiction" without lapsing into the lifeless formalism and abstraction represented by the vase? The resolution he reaches here is that the "never-resting mind," "delights" in the endless creative challenge of composing poems out of the recalcitrant words and obdurate sounds of language which nonetheless satisfy the poet and reader's subjective need for an "expressible bliss." The imperfection here, it should be noted, is in the reality of language not the "pressure of reality" or nature, which is neither perfect or imperfect simply itself. The imperfection of the poem may therefore be regarded as the trace or residue of their "real base."

Stevens could have at best a problematic relationship with any completed or perfected (L. > *per-* through + *facere* to make) artwork or text, given the priority he places on the creative act and its continual repetition and the imperative to make each image an original or "first idea." He once observed that "we are always at the end of an idea" because for him any text becomes a "late plural" as soon as written, repeating by virtue merely of its not changing. Like this unchanging as, statues often "figure" as symbols of fossilized ideas or dogmas. What Stevens fails

to address in this poem (or elsewhere in his poetry) is the contradiction between this incessant mental activity and the mental peace which he designates as the end or goal of poetry.

15.3 “Of Mere Being” (note 41.) Stevens, tellingly, returns to the temptation of a perfect and therefore perfectly abstract artwork in his final or “death poem,” “Of Mere Being,” there symbolized by a gold-feathered, mechanical bird, mesmerizing but ultimately lifeless and inhuman. This in turn is an allusion to a similar automaton in Yeats’ “Byzantium,” identified as the “living dead” or zombie. From this perspective, a poetic text, like the Grecian urn, is the ghost of its maker and a memento mori, in fact, its poet’s decaying corpse. In contrast with “The Poems of Our Climate,” Stevens’ final poem appears to renounce all poetry as ultimately an intoxicating but futile pursuit of an abstract existence to escape our “mere being.”

16. Keats’ “Ode to Psyche”

16.1 Keats’ “Endymion.” The condemnation of Romantic images as worn-out trash in “The Man on the Dump” could be read as Stevens’ rebarbative rebuttal of Keats’ well-known line, “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” This is, perhaps not coincidentally, the opening of “Endymion,” (1818) his retelling of the myth of the eponymous shepherd, beloved of Selene, the Titan moon goddess, who places him into an eternal sleep so he would never age or die and she could gaze upon his ageless beauty forever. Keats’ celebration of this reflected, moonlit “moonning” over an unchanging image of beauty may have struck Stevens as typifying the complacent, poetic conventions used as an escape from reality and the challenge of forging fresh “first ideas” or original creative sparks struck directly off the “rock of the real” and bearing its residue.

16.2 “Ode to the Nightingale.” Stevens could equally have had in mind a passage from a later Keats ode where the mortally-ill poet wishes he could merge with the song of a nightingale and so escape “on wings of song” into an enchanted dreamscape under the sway of the “Queen Moon:”

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
- Keats, “Ode to the Nightingale,” ll.31-37

35

Keats finds he cannot follow the flight of his metaphor and the ode ends with his finding himself left behind in his dying body in the cold light of day, asking: “Was it a vision or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music. Do I wake or sleep?” This succinctly poses a question which is also

central to much of Stevens' poetry: which is more real subjectivity and its fictions or the intractable givens of reality, "the plain sense of things?" His answer vacillates between "Notes," P:VIII:8-13 where, in contrast with Keats, he is transformed into his own aerial metaphor, the angel of imagination, and his "death poem," "Of Mere Being," where he seems to be reduced to his material existence or reality.

17. "The Myth of the Given"

In the final line of "The Man on the Dump," Stevens appears to question, however rhetorically and flippantly, what is a central tenet of his epistemology: the existence of "the the," the "thing-in-itself" with definite, given qualities, autonomous or independent of the mind observing them, a reality lying in wait in nature to be discovered; this belief has come to be characterized as the "myth of the given." Stevens offers what could serve as a concise description of it at "Notes," A:IV:14,15: "there was a myth before the myth began/Venerable and articulate and complete." Kant never ceased to believe in the *Ding-an-Sich*, or thing-in-itself, pre-eminently God, although he denied they could be known from the a posteriori evidence of the senses because observed through the a priori aesthetic and analytic categories of the mind (note 1.6.) The commonsensical or pragmatic form of the "myth of the given," scientific positivism or empiricism, assumes that reality corresponds or correlates with the terms of everyday speech, a version of what Aquinas called *adequatio*, an adequate equivalence or approximation. Stevens' apparent *aporia* here may help to illuminate one of his more enigmatic aphorisms: "To find the real/ To be stripped of every fiction except one/ The fiction of an absolute." Although he was unwilling to surrender this last fiction, the "myth of the given," he does at least acknowledge that it is an article of faith, perhaps the only one he allowed himself.

This interpretation may be strengthened by the fact that the lines which immediately follow it in Stevens' *Collected Poems*, seem to retract this rare instance of skepticism about the real, in keeping with Stevens' reflex when he feels he has over-reached in his claims for imagination.

It was when I said,
"There is no such thing as the truth"
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole."
- "On the Road Home," ll.1-4

This reference here is to the same Aesop's fable as in "Postcard from the Volcano" which warns, in effect, that when the fox questions the Reality Principle, that is wonders "Where was it one first heard of the truth, the the," the Pleasure Principle embellishes reality so that the fox forgot its dangers and is lured from his den into a trap.

The figure of the poet as a "man on the dump" returns in "Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction," A:X:16-21, where Stevens compares contemporary poets to vagabonds clad in the tatters of out-

worn traditions (and presumably poetic conventions,) misguidedly scavenging for fresh imaginative clothing on the scrapheap of the past. There, he instructs the “ephebe” or “poet of the future” to cloth homeless, modern man in the “final elegance” of a “supreme fiction” which can turn the givens of our present “time of dearth” into an “accessible bliss” and austere dignity.

18. The General and the Particular

18.1 Aristotle’s Universals. Aristotle explained the existence of general types despite their existence only as particular instantiations by positing “universals” or “essences” each with its own “entelechy,” defined as “that which a thing is becoming.” Aristotle’s idealism thus differed from Plato’s Ideas in that his universals did not exist independently of their imperfect manifestations resulting from the “accidents” of their specific development which deflected them from their teleology, goal or ideal type.

18.2 A Logical Universe. Stevens’ mock-logic in this poem seems specifically targeted at medieval Scholasticism, a Christianized version of Aristotle, in which the “mind of God,” “the all-creating word,” wrote the “book of nature” as a set of a priori propositions and logical deductions from them. Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) updated this Thomistic synthesis for a post-theocratic age by substituting an Absolute Idea, Logic or God which he asserted was dialectically thinking its way towards an all-inclusive, absolute truth, which took the form of the “progress” of world history culminating in the Prussian state. This idea came full circle when the French Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, (1881-1955) conceived a Christian God in the process of evolving or “thinking” himself through a heady Gallic pot au feu of Catholic mysticism, cosmogony, geology, paleontology and existentialist philosophy.

18.3 Language as Metonym. The problem of the particular and the general relates directly to Stevens central concern: the relationship between words and ideas which are generals and abstractions and reality which always exists only in its particulars. The particularity of each life and death forms the philosophical subtext of his early “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and late “The Course of a Particular.” Stevens held “that only particulars exists” and therefore words were merely abstractions or generalizations, based purely on the mind’s association of similar or contiguously occurring phenomena, the same objection Hume had made to causality. As a result, words had, for Stevens, a merely metonymic or associative relation to reality, not integral as with a synecdoche (a part of a whole) or a metaphor (based on similar characteristics.) It followed that language’s categories reduced the plenitude of reality to its own arbitrary and conventional categories or vocabulary, “the celestial ennui of apartments,” “Notes,” A:II:1.

19. Stevens as Public Poet

19.1 World War II. Stevens amplifies the theme of “On Modern Poetry” at several points in “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,” written in the same year of World War II mobilization, 1942. He compares the poet there to “A little string [which] speaks for a crowd of voices,” C:IV:15 and

who seeks to speak the “gibberish of the vulgate,” C:IX: 17 by which he means speaks to the subjective experiences of his readers. In the Epilogue to that poem, he writes that the poet and the soldier are “a pair/ Two parallels that meet” and that “The soldier is poor without the poet’s lines...that stick, inevitably modulating, in the blood,” even concluding, “How simply the fictive hero becomes the real/ How gladly with proper words the soldier dies.” Some critics have found this a self-serving afterthought, a justification for his aestheticism by a poet who could hardly ignore the war raging around him; as such, it bears comparison with T.S. Eliot’s contemporaneous, overtly patriotic “Little Gidding” in *Four Quartets*, rallying Englishmen of all political stripes to rise to a moment where historic and eschatological time coincide.

19.2 “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” Stevens was not simply responding to the war since his major poem of the pre-War years, “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” (1937) begins with what seems like a similar, if less direct, defense of the public value of poetry and a possible apologia for its lack of “realism” as demanded by poets of the New Deal and Popular Front of the time:

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.
They said; “You have a blue guitar.
You do not play things as they are.”
The man replied, “Things as they are 5
Are changed upon the blue guitar.”
And they said then, “but play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.” 10
- “The Man With the Blue Guitar,” ll. 1-10

2. shearsman of sorts – The image, a guitar player bent over his guitar like a sheep shearer over his sheep, suggests a number of possible meanings **1)** that he “takes the wool away from people’s eye” **2)** that he turns the natural fleece into a form where it can be woven into a fiction or imaginative covering for the mind, a frequent metaphor for Stevens (see note **10.**)

2. The day was green – the color of organic growth and nature, “the plain sense of things,” the real.

3. blue – the color of air, sky and mental space where the imagination can take flight.

4. The green day appears blue on the guitar because the mind and art and “abstract” and “change” reality into consciousness, “first ideas” or fictions.

8. beyond us, yet ourselves – **1)** beyond the listeners’ ability to express yet true to their feelings and needs **2)** beyond the natural or “real” and therefore satisfying to our conscious selves.

10. things exactly as they are – as they are to the mind, what Stevens calls “the intricate evasions of as.”

20. “Notes” as Metatext: Decreation, Désœuvrement, Deconstruction

20.1 Deconstruction. The self-consciousness of “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” as a poem about poetry, an *Ars Poetica*, inevitably raises questions about its metatextual dimension and its relationship to the deconstruction theories of the 1970 and 1980s. Stevens’ vigilance against metaphysics, his epistemological skepticism, his ambivalence towards subjectivity and language, all resonate with a post-modern distrust of discourse. At the same time, “presentist” preoccupations may distort the poem’s reflexive intentions. Stevens closely guarded his poetic persona and any apparent self-revelation should be considered premeditated and redacted. Paul de Man (the Heidegger of deconstruction) observed: “‘Notes’ is a text whose self-conscious rhetoricity renders it indeterminate and proleptically invites its own deconstruction,” which seems to mean, it pre-empt its exegetes’ attempts to unmask its latent assumptions, what Stevens calls “the hermit in a poet’s metaphors,” A:II:6.

20.2 Decreation. At the same time Stevens was writing “Notes,” 1942, two French theorists were engaged in their own more urgent proto-deconstructive practices. The heteroclete Simone Weil (1909-1943) Marxist, Jewish, Catholic mystic and martyr, distinguished between “deconstruction,” as purely destructive negation, comparable to Stevens’ raging lion and adolescent rebels in A:V, Nietzsche’s active nihilism and Bloom’s “organic ego,” and “decreation” which de-created or undid the self, in a sense reversing the Creator’s creation to return to an uncreated oneness. This could therefore be regarded as heretical for the same reason suicide is, a reversal of God’s design; indeed, Weil is thought to have “decreated” herself by starving to death in 1943 in solidarity with the inmates of Nazi concentration camps.

20.3 Kenosis. A closely allied process of self-emptying or *kenosis*, a term introduced by Bloom taken from Christian doctrine for Christ’s emptying of his divine essence in order to allow him to suffer as a human, features in most ascetic practices, for example, the Christian *via negativa* (L. > *via* path *negativa* self-negation or Buddhist *nirvana* (Sans. > “self-extinguishing.”) Stevens was aware of Weil but seems to have seen in the frangibility of modern life the opposite of her humility and self-renunciation, proclaiming, “Modern reality is a reality of ‘decreation’ in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief but the precious portents of our own powers.”

20.4 Désœuvrement. During these same testing years in France, the literary critic, Maurice Blanchot, (1907-2003) analyzed language not in terms of what it could say but what it couldn’t. He stressed the failure and futility of its loquacious compulsion to try to describe the impenetrable darkness of alterity or “otherness,” not least the otherness of its own material existence, a blindness he described as “the second night.” Blanchot argued that an author was obliged, if he found silence impossible which authors by definition do, to reveal the fraudulent nature of his enterprise through the *désœuvrement* or “unworking” of his own text. The paragon of such self-deprecatory poetics, Samuel Beckett, (1906-1989) gave his fellow authors this gnomic advice: “Fail, Fail again, Fail better.” In a world without rank order or truths, “better” could only mean to expose the absurdity of literary efforts and its *mal fois* more candidly and abjectly.

20.5 Against Deconstruction. Stevens can surprise us with his own Beckett-like revulsion when confronted with language's ultimate inability to speak of anything but itself, especially about reality, for example, the self-disgust of his nihilistic "The Man on the "Dump" and the "counter-" or "anti-poetics" which runs through "Notes" itself (see note 26.) Despite his acute awareness of language's epistemological limits, Stevens resists the abstemious linguistics and semantic reticence of many post-modern writers, insisting that poetry must construct, not deconstruct, its fictions to infuse the world with value and invest it with "privileged" moments of an "accessible bliss." He wrote, "For the sensitive poet, conscious of negations, nothing is more difficult than the affirmation of nobility and yet there is nothing he requires of himself more persistently, since in them and in their kind alone are to be found those sanctions that are the reason for his being and for that occasional ecstatic freedom of the mind which is his special privilege."

20.6 Metatext. Stevens may have defined the metatextual intentions of his poetry in a celebrated passage from a poem he wrote after "Notes," published in 1950.

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry
As the life of poetry. A more severe

More harassing master would extemporize
Subtler more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.
- "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," XXIII:10-18

This extended syllogism could be crudely diagrammed as: the poem's revelation = the theory of poetry = the theory of life = life as it is = the intricate evasions of as = life is "as" it is = life is a fiction = life is this poem. Stevens' strategy therefore is not to estrange the reader and himself from the text but to implicate them in its composition as a paradigm for life "as it is," as an "as if" or a self-conscious fiction. This follows from "there being nothing else" because "The poet constructs a world, gives life to the supreme fiction, without which we are incapable of conceiving a world." The predominant trope or "turning" in "Notes," therefore, is not negation of the text but negation of the "real" or alterity, what Stevens calls abstraction, followed by the negation of that negation, the change or turning of "I am the world," my objectivity, into "I am my fiction" or my subjectivity. Thus for a conscious being his reality is his subjectivity which is the reality of a fiction (see note 33.)

21. Motif: “I Am that I Am”

21.1 Exodus. God’s cryptic response to Moses when he asks his name in Exodus 3:14 is *eyheh aser ehyeh*, a Hebrew phrase which admits to diverse interpretations: “I am the uncreated Creator;” “I exist without attributes or names because I am all of them;” “I shall be who I shall be;” “I am Being, the Self-Existent;” “I am the one who was and who is to come;” “I cannot be named, only worshipped;” “I am unchanging, the unmoving prime mover.” It may also represent an occult pronunciation of the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the unspeakable name of God or Yahweh.

21.2 As Self-Projection. Stevens uses the King James’ Version’s, “I am that I am,” which ricochets through “Notes” to become one of its central motifs, changing its meaning as the poem’s argument develops. For Stevens, it initially represents the sterility of any identity or equation, an uncreative, self-replication or self-projection, a tautology which, in the end, means nothing. The repetitive “booming bees” in C:I:7, a pun on “bes,” that is modes of being, Aristotle’s unchanging universals or essences, contrasts with the fresh “becoming” of a new spring. Ideas which have “not changed enough,” C:I:14 turn into dogmas, petrified “first ideas,” the “cold copulars” of C:IV:5 because the “copular” or verb “to be” does not change its subject to a different predicate, only restates itself and hence is sterile and imaginatively impotent. The “fire wind string,” P:I:8 refers to the seductive Siren song or empty wind of metaphysical speculation, while “A lasting vision, in a lasting bush,” P:III:1 is a metaphor for a vision or “first idea” repeated so often it becomes a “late plural” of itself. The solipsistic sparrow’s “Bethou me!” P:VI:1 represents projection’s reduction of everything to a re-instantiation of itself and hence a copular. In an extended sense, the “Pathetic Fallacy” (note 40) repeats God’s self-projection by anthropomorphizing the universe.

21.3 As Self-Creation. The “I am that I am” motif is transformed with the growing recognition in the poem of the poet as self-creating through his construction of the “supreme fiction.” “He is and may be but oh! he is” at A:IX:6 affirms that poetic potential, whether realized or not, is “transpersonal,” that is an element of humans’ species being. “As I am, I am the spouse,” C:VIII:5,6 can be read, “In the absence of my active, creative aspect or animus, I am whatever others make of me,” or “As an ‘as if,’ a trope or fiction, I am the anima or image my animus desires to see.” Finally, at the poem’s climatic moment, P:VII:18, Stevens changes God’s “I am that I am” into a new “first idea” or meaning for that motif: “As I am, I am,” that is, “I am as I imagine I am, I am my fictions or subjectivity.” He thus affirms that the fictive self, *being-as* as opposed to *being-a*, fated fixed identity, can provide a limited but sufficient, self-sustaining redemption from the givens of human reality.

22. Reification

22.1 Alienation. Turning an idea into a thing (“thing-in-itself,” a mode of being or fixed essence,) a reality with a discrete, autonomous existence from the mind, is referred to as “reification,” (L. > *res* thing + *facere* to make) literally “thing-ification,” also, depending on context, “projection,” “objectification,” “essentializing,” “naturalizing,” “ideology” and “a metaphysic.” The “thing-in-itself” could, in fact, represent the classic (and classically unwitting) instance of reification since “things” only exist insofar as consciousness constitutes them as objects endowed with a continuing essence or unity. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) argued that the idea of God, Stevens’ first “first idea,” was also the primal “reification,” “alienation” or displacement of man’s own creativity onto to an imaginary entity or “other. Hence, God as the Creator was created by man in his own image, rather than the reverse. This influenced Marx’s understanding of the commodity as a “fetish object,” where a worker’s own labor “congealed” in a commodity returned to confront him in the marketplace as an “other” or “thing” rather than the result of his own labor; it had been alienated, objectified or “othered” by turning a social relationship, capitalist production, into a thing, a product.

22.2 Projection. Shelley (1792-1822) called the reification of a poet’s desires into an idealized “love object” separate from himself and therefore unobtainable, an “escaped epipsyche,” (Gr. > *epi-* beyond + *psuchidion* little soul) that is “a-soul-outside-the-soul.” Frankenstein, the creation of his wife, Mary Woolstonecraft Shelley, (1797-1851) could be thought of as such an escaped epipsyche. This danger was recognized by other Romantic poets, for example, Blake in “The Crystal Cabinet” and Keats in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci.” Shelley, like the Romantic philosopher A. Schlegel, (1772-1829) maintained that the poet was always greater than his poems, so there would inevitably be a “remainder” or excess of creative energy beyond what could be expressed in his texts which would congeal in a phantom epipsyche. Shelley and Schlegel’s contention especially rankled T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) who believed a text was a cultural artefact which embodied a wisdom beyond its author’s own, indeed beyond any author, but the “Author of all, God.”

22.3 Psychology. This idea finds an echo in Freud’s hypothesis that “excess libidinal energy” is discharged in relations with external objects, notably caregivers and lovers, a process he labeled “object cathexis.” Since he held that this excess energy was inevitably an excess of self-love, any external object, however solicitous or compliant, would frustrate or being unable to absorb this discharge, condemning humanity to a state of permanent dissatisfaction or “ordinary unhappiness” (to say nothing of marital discord.) Freud’s speculation provided the basis for object relations psychology which posited that early childhood relationships became internalized as “mental objects” (object formation,) relational templates which were later projected inappropriately and inevitably unsuccessfully onto real objects (people, social institutions, fetishes) The splitting of subject and object parallels Jung’s dyad, *animus* and *anima*, the poet and his idealized muse, whose integration in the “mature ego” as a unified self, finds an echo in Stevens’ frequent use of gendered pairs (see notes 6 and 30.) One implication of Bloom’s “Crossing of Election” might be for the “organic ego’s” projection of its unlimited desire onto

the real world, a romantic or political ideal to be shifted onto its own de-objectified creative process or “creative ego,” its poetic vocation.

23. Motif: The Angel of the Imagination

For Stevens, angels (L. > *angelus* messenger) are a frequent metaphor for metaphor and tropes in general because they carry a “celestial” or abstract tenor, idea, meaning or message across mental space to a “real” or concrete vehicle. Tropes are often referred to as “figures of speech,” that is images created out of language and existing only there, so the angel of the imagination is a literal figure of speech. For example, in A:III: 9, the vehicle is “blood beating in the heart” but the tenor is the thought flowing through and animating the mind. Stevens seems so taken with this metaphor that he repeats it at A:VI:21.

This angel motif reappears throughout “Notes:” as the debauched seraph of C:I, the ascetic angel, Nanzia Nunzio, in C:VIII, the seraphic swans of C:X, Canon Aspirin in P:VI who becomes the silenced angel in his cloud of P:VI1:19 and the rebellious angel of P:VIII, finally recognized as Stevens’ own imagination. Thus, by the poem’s conclusion, vehicle and tenor have merged when confronted with their own maker.

In Stevens’ “realist” or “materialist” angelology, the angels’ trajectories are also reversed; they carry or “abstract” reality or sense stimuli into conscious space where they are infused with a “transcendental” message, tenor or *pathos*, becoming a “fiction that results from feeling,” P:X:15. For example, Canon Aspirin in P:VI lifts his impoverished nieces’ perceptions, uninflected sensations or the “plain sense of things,” to the furthest reaches of abstraction where they can become dreams, while in P:VIII the angel rebels against the unmediated sense stimuli to which he is told to listen in P:VII:19 by plunging into the “violent abyss” of the “real” to pluck or retrieve “glory” and “majesty” from it, reversing the abstraction in P:VI into concretization, thus, renewing himself and the trope of the angel as a fresh “first idea” which is his identity with the poet’s reality.

The poems other airborne “messengers,” the bees in C:I and birds in C:VI and P:IX provide an avian burlesque of the angel of poetry; their repetitive noises parody language’s “significant sounds,” reducing verse to its material element or phonic surd, mere rhyme and alliteration. Nonetheless in P:IX, Stevens accepts even these repetitive “calls” or “cries” as “works final in themselves,” original in the sense of C:II:15-21, that each spring is a “first” or fresh beginning. Stevens’ book of critical essays, *The Necessary Angel* (Vintage Books, New York, 1951) argues for the necessity of fictions, “there being nothing else,” not as beliefs or hypotheses about the real world but as self-conscious transformations of that reality, that inarticulate alterity or otherness into a form where it can provide a subjective dwelling for the mind’s peace.

24. Stevens' Politics

Unlike most of Stevens' poetry, Canto A:V's considerable obscurities can perhaps be clarified by reference to the political backdrop of 1942, the poem's "occasion." For example, ll.1-10 seem directed at the totalitarian, *revanchiste* politics of the right and left which Stevens, like others of his social milieu, held responsible for the war then raging. The poets criticized in ll.11-21 could be almost any of his contemporaries but especially "protest poets," for example, the Communist Surrealists like Breton and Eluard and the fellow traveler, Auden, during his (later repudiated) political period. Stevens, a Taft Republican like most of his business cronies in Hartford's Canoe Club, opposed the New Deal's intrusion on "free enterprise" and supported its repeal.

Beyond this, Bruce Bayer in a review of Paul Mariani's *The Whole of Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2016) in the Spring, 2016 issue of *The Hudson Review*, suggests that Stevens shared the racist sentiments of his Southern segregationist drinking buddies in Key West, one of whom may even have supplied the inexcusable title of Stevens' early poem, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." Like Eliot, Pound and his paragon, Santayana, Stevens was also sympathetic to the totalitarian cultural agenda of Italian Fascism, though put off by Il Duce's posturing and adventurism. Unlike Pound and Eliot, he at least did not publicly propagandize for his reactionary or racist sentiments or link them to his poetics, which at most can be condemned for an elitest inattention to the "objective conditions" of most of the world's people. Stevens provides another illustration, if one were needed, that poets provide among the *least* reliable guides to politics because of their promiscuous interpretation of "existing" political movements and actual economic realities as metaphors for their aesthetic theories.

25. Stevens' Connoisseurship

25.1 Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism. Stevens seems to argue in canto A:V that the gestures or brushstrokes of a painter imitate the motions of what he is painting, for example, "brushy clouds," a not altogether convincing attempt perhaps to link art with reality. This might be cited as an instance of the "Fallacy of Imitative Form," for example, that a novel of about boredom must be boring. Stevens' hypothesis here could be thought of as the inverse of non-objective, Abstract Expressionist "action painting" where the brush imitates not nature but human nature, the emotions or subjectivity of the painter, not a mimesis of objective reality.

25.2 A Middle Ground. Stevens himself was an occasional collector of art, insofar as his comparatively modest means allowed, (in the days before AIG and mortgage-backed securities raised insurance executive's salaries to the level of hedge fund managers.) He assembled a small but discriminating collection of canvases mostly by minor French artists loosely associated with

the post-War Ecole de Paris, whose better known exponents include Pierre Tal-Coat (1905-1985) and Nicholas de Stael (1914-1955.) In contrast with the un-pent “libido” of American Abstract Expressionism, these painters explored the ambiguous boundary between abstraction and representation in keeping with the Cubist project out of which they grew which emphasized the tension between art and reality rather than the latter’s elimination, thus paralleling Stevens’ interest in how the real could both be retained and changed by abstraction. The poet is known to have owned the landscape by Jean Marchand (1885-1940) mentioned in “Connoisseur of Chaos,” l.12 while the dedicatee of “Notes,” Stevens’ wealthy friend, Henry Church, owned a substantial collection of contemporary art.

25.3 Paul Klee. Stevens was especially drawn to the work of the Swiss painter, Paul Klee, (1879-1940) as representing the kind of modernism to which his poems aspired. Helen Vendler in the *Voices and Visions* video biography of the poet notes that, like Stevens, “Klee is not a directly realistic painter but full of whimsical, fanciful, imaginative and humorous projections of reality in his paintings. The paintings are often enigmatic, full of riddles and Stevens liked that too.” Klee’s work is usually characterized as graphic (*deseño*) rather than painterly (like that of Stevens’ paragon, Franz Hals,) treading the border between abstraction, caricature, satire and diagrams. He developed a personal symbolic vocabulary, arrows, geometric shapes, stick figures, from which he constructed abstract, almost surrealist, psychological portraits and landscapes, analogous to Stevens’ uses of motifs and fables. Klee, a skilled violinist, also attempted to introduce a temporal or musical dimension into his paintings, another parallel with poetry. For example, he would establish a background pattern of regularly repeating “dividuals,” similar to musical beats or a scale, against which he would place “individuals,” graphic events which might be compared with melody or a solo instrument. His drawing or line tends to be continuous, not outlining forms so much as tracing the progress of his thought and its generation of forms out of which recognizable shapes and symbols emerge, a calligraphic style which also allies it with poetry and treads the border between perception and thought, representation and abstraction.

26. Stevens’ “Counter-Poetics”

26.1 The Counter-Argument. Canto A:VII qualifies and in many ways contradicts the heroic role Stevens assigns to the creative artist as the “giant of the weather” in A:VI, while implicitly calling into question the tri-partite dialectic of the imagination structuring “Notes,” even before he has fully presented it. The canto might be dismissed as the poet’s characteristic self-deprecation were its argument not repeated in each of the correspondingly numbered cantos, C:VII and P:VII, as well as reappearing at important junctures throughout the poem. The alternative mode of poetic vision it advances — as much an “anti-“ as a “counter-poetics” — clearly had a strong attraction for Stevens, even if he ultimately rejects it by the end of “Notes,” because it returns in a more severe form in “Not the Idea about the Thing, But the Thing Itself,” his last published poem.

In A:VII Stevens describes a process of “composing as the body tires,” l.4 in effect, a de-composing, reversal or refusal of poetic activity and the opposite of composition, a “de-creation” or abnegation of the mind’s synthetic abilities (see note 20.) Similarly, in C:VII:10-13, the poet “sighs” for a “bliss” which “ever-ready love” can inhale as “effortlessly” as an odor, “and nothing known,” in other words, an im-mediate or “unmediated,” direct experience of “things-in-themselves,” prior to any mental categorization, cognition or verbalization. Stevens is more specific at P:I:7, where he dismisses poetry and religion as “facile” compared with the “difficullest rigor” which is to “catch” the “irrational moment,” the pre-rational, sense stimulus, in its “unreasoning,” l.14-17. “Unreasoning” here refers to both the individual moment’s inherent *lack* of reason and the renunciation of what Stevens calls in C:VII:21, “later reason,” the transformation of perception by imagination, how Wordsworth’s defines poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) as “emotion recollected in tranquillity.” Finally, in P:VII:6,7, Stevens warns that “to impose is not to discover,” effectively investing meaning and affect as implicit or given in nature, not infused by the imagination. He goes on to speak of “weather” in l.10, his usual term for “emotional atmosphere,” as “come upon,” “out of nothing,” again “without reasoning,” in contrast with the “weather by Franz Hals” in A:VI:3 which was composed by the artist, described there as the “giant of the weather.” Stevens underlines these “negative poetics” in P:VII:17,18 by declaring that “To find the real [the mind] must be stripped of every fiction except the fiction of an absolute,” that is, the a priori conviction that there is an underlying “reality” or given “out there” for the mind to “come upon” (see note 17.)

26.2 Five Sources. This “counter-poetics” running like a minor theme through “Notes” is consistent with Stevens’ life-long ambivalence towards poetry’s abstraction and the imagination’s change of reality which manifests itself in his poetry in five primary ways. **1)** He often qualifies, almost as a reflex, any strong claim for the imagination, for example in A:VI and A:VII, devaluing poetic images as merely “after-thoughts” or “later reasoning” compared with the “unmediated,” pre-linguistic immediacy of “things-in-themselves.” **2)** He insists that an “abstracted” image or fiction must retain some residue of its “base” in the “real,” which leads him to propose multiple metaphors to account for this epistemologically promiscuous intercourse between mind and matter, for example in C:IV and P:IV. **3)** His “counter-poetics” attempts to bridge the gap between subjective and objective by the expedient of eliminating the mental processes which are a pre-condition for any conscious experience. **4)** They are also consistent with his positivist or empiricist belief in the “plain sense of things,” the “myth of the given” and poetry’s obligation not to traduce it, in short, a commitment to “poetic realism” in opposition to the “Pathetic Fallacy” (see note 40.) **5)** His counter-poetics resolves the contradiction in Stevens’ dialectic of the imagination, noted elsewhere, between its means, continual imaginative activity, and its end, a mind at rest.

26.3 Romantic Antecedents. Stevens’ “counter-poetics” is less surprising when seen in the context of his Romantic predecessors’ advocacy for a similar mental quietism as the pre-condition for glimpsing the transcendent “reality” underlying and unifying mind and nature. Wordsworth, for example, commends a “wise passiveness:”

...that serene and blessed mood,	
In which...we are laid asleep	45
In body, and become a living soul:	
While with an eye made quiet by the power	
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,	
We see into the life of things.	50
- "Tintern Abbey," ll.44-50	

Keats, a constant, if unacknowledged, presence in Stevens' verse, articulates a similar sentiment in his celebrated description of "negative capability," ironically distinguishing it from Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" and Coleridge's demand for "poetic realism:"

At once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

-Letter to Tom Keats, December 21, 1817

Stevens' "counter-poetics" not only give a "fair hearing" to these arguments but leave open a space for the Romantic faith that mind and nature can be reconciled through a sympathy anterior to mind or cognition which separates them.

26.4 Ascetic Poetics. Harold Bloom has drawn attention to the parallels between the *kenosis* or emptying of synthetic, active mental activity in Romantic mythopoeia, outlined above, and the ascetic practices of most religious traditions: the Christian *via negativa* or "the path of renunciation" of Tertullian, Meister Eckhardt and St. John of the Cross; the Brahmanic doctrine of *nirvana*, "self-extinguishing" of desire and the self in the *Upanishads* and Advaita Vedanta; Shi'a Islam's *ta'til* or "negation," and Sufism's *faana*, "self-annihilation." In apophantic or "negative" theologies, God can only be known by what he is not and what we cannot know, epitomized in the title of the influential 14th Century devotional guide, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. If the self and world are *maya*, illusion or demonic traps, as the early Christian Gnostics believed, God can only be approached through silence and the renunciation of self, will and mental activity, leaving little room for poetry or art. Deconstruction, de-creation, *désœuvrement* and post-modern linguistic skittishness may all be related to a similar atavistic distrust of man's mental faculties (see note 20.)

26.5 "Unmediated Vision." This apophantic aesthetics (description by exclusion or negation) is predicated on the possibility of what Geoffrey Hartman referred to as "unmediated vision" in *Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke and Valéry*, (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1954) a direct apprehension of "things-in-themselves" or ultimate reality. Stevens seems to have this in mind when he refers to "being real/ Clear and, except for the eye,

without intrusion,” P:II:20,21. The phrase recalls Emerson’s epiphany in which he becomes a “transparent eyeball” allowing him see the transcendent in nature, what Stevens calls the mind “cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set” in “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” l.13.

From an epistemological point of view, “unmediated vision” is dubious, even something of an oxymoron, since vision, like any conscious experience, must be mediated (in Kant’s terminology, “transcendental” or categorized) to become a conscious experience; thus vision is a process of mediation. Kant’s insight has been confirmed by contemporary neurophysiology’s “constructive” model of perception and cognition which has demonstrated that sense stimuli are processed by the brain, resulting in an infinitesimal delay between the event and its sorting and translation into a form in which the mind can become aware of it. Stevens is therefore technically correct when he describes any idea, even a “first idea,” as “belated” or “later reason” so his counter- hypothesis, that this can be circumvented by a direct, “unmediated” experience of the “real,” becomes untenable. An apophantic poetry, like an apophantic religion would appear to be limited to saying what it cannot say or what it knows to be untrue, begging the question, why say it?

26.6 Stevens’ Self-Refutation. One reason for belaboring this “counter-poetics” in “Notes” is that Stevens himself explicitly rejects it at crucial points in the poem. For example, while he implies in A:II:13-18 that poetry patterns its motions or tropes after nature, at A:III:21 he dismisses this as “nonsense,” at A:IV:19 as “mimicry” and at C:VI:7 as “idiot minstrelsy.” In C:VIII:13-21, the ascetic angel, Nanzia Nunzio, in a classic example of *kenosis* renounces her imaginative capacities and sheds her ornaments (ideas or images) to stand naked before a stone head, representing nature or the given, and absurdly asks it to “array me...entire in the final filament,” only to be told, in effect, “do it yourself:” “A fictive covering/ Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.” Similarly, in P:V, Canon Aspirin’s sister’s austere household is an allegory for the impoverishment of “unmediated” sense experience, “untransformed” by imagination or “later reason,” illustrating the emaciated empiricism of the “plain sense of things.” Her brother, a kind of Epicurean angel of the imagination and representative of the Pleasure Principle, brings her children, personifications of her perceptions, the dreams or fictions she denies them. In Stevens’ “epiphany” in P:VIII, the angel of the imagination, his own creation, defies Stevens’ “anti-poetic” injunction in P:VII to be still and “listen” to nature by flying into the abyss of the “real” to pluck an image, a “first idea” or message, to carry into mental space, creating a fresh, “first” idea of himself to take the place of Stevens’ silencing and immobilizing him. Stevens’ imagination, poetic libido or Pleasure Principle (to indulge in a Freudian metaphor) over-rides his hypertrophic superego or Reality Principle when he realizes that he and the angel are one, a fictional creation, and that, for conscious beings, reality is fictive or constructed so that they exist in the “intricate evasions of as,” concluding “As I am, I am.”

26.7 Stevens’ Defense of Poetry. Focusing on this “counter-argument” in “Notes” is important because on balance Stevens’ skepticism is directed not at exposing poetic fictions as “false,” the

crude demand of Ruskin and Coleridge's "poetic realism" and his reductive poetics, but at staking out a position for poetry free from unsupportable epistemological claims to "absolute truth," whether physical or metaphysical. Stevens' staunch opposition to metaphysics does not imply a post-modern rejection of values, a discursive *désœuvrement* or refusal of meaning *tout court*, on the contrary, he affirms "We must not see through the eyes of the past, but we still must see." "Notes" could, in fact, be read as a nuanced but still ringing defense of poetic fictions in the face of Stevens' own reductive, paleo-deconstruction – "there being nothing else" and "without which we are incapable of conceiving a world." The poem seems to affirm a "secular humanist" faith in the redeeming power of subjectivity, the ultimate transformation of the world into a supreme fiction, prefigured in "Sunday Morning" and "The Idea of Key West," and, in its way, as ambitious and visionary a project as Blake's.

26.8 Stevens' "Return to the Real." Stevens was never again to make such confident or sweeping claims for the imagination, so the "counter-poetics" in "Notes" can be seen as prefiguring what has been called the "return to the real" in his later work. There, however, it manifests itself not as a neo-Romantic quest for an "unmediated vision" but a resignation to "the plain sense of things," actually there lack of any sense, the emotional numbness of "The Course of a Particular." Still, in his last published poem, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," the notion resurfaces in the "scrawny" caw of a bird, which provides a "new knowledge of reality," (though, we should note, ironically an *idea* about reality not the thing itself.) In the end, Stevens may be too self-critical a poet to disguise his doubts or aspirations behind a consistent poetics; the mind's oscillations are a necessary pre-condition for its freedom and creativity and hence an integral part of a metatext which demonstrates the process of its own composition. It would therefore be unwise and probably futile to seek out a consistent epistemology or unitary self from a poet who declares, "As I am, I am."

27. "The Idea of Order at Key West" Redux: Canto A:VIII

Cantos A:VIII and A:IX could be read Stevens' highly abbreviated, non-autobiographical and allegorical version of Wordsworth's *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*. In canto A:VIII, Stevens again wrestles with how the "real" can be retained or carried over to the mind's fictions. MacCullough, as the personification of the imagination, abstracts or assimilates the sea, symbol of amorphous alterity, source of life and all imagery, into consciousness, in effect "translating" the non-verbal into the verbal, the same process performed in the same place as the "She" or muse of the "The Idea of Order at Key West." Stevens therefore both references and recasts the earlier poem in terms of the poetics or dialectic of the imagination of "Notes." The ethereal "She" of that poem, a homonym hovering above the Sea, here becomes the plebian everyman, MacCullough, "lounging by the sea/ Drowned in its washes," a kind of travesty of the anadyomene Venus rising from the sea as depicted by Botticelli or Ingres. In A:VIII, Stevens' metaphor for the imagination might be compared with a permeable membrane immersed in an amniotic sac or primal sea which

seamlessly absorbs the “real” into the embryo of the imagination. In contrast, “The Idea of Order at Key West” emphasize the mind’s autonomy from nature not its continuity:

“She sang beyond the genius of the Sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice
Like a body wholly body fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry, 5
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard 10
Since what she sang was uttered word by word....

She measured to the hour its solitude. 35
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang the sea
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.”

- “The Idea of Order at Key West,” ll.1-11, 35-39

The metaphor of the imagination as an embryo in A:VIII may not have satisfied Stevens, perhaps because it substitutes an organic process for a mental process, eliding the difference between matter and mind. This may explain why he provides a second account of the “ontogeny” or development of the infant imagination in the following canto A:IX, where it is explained as a process of internal development through interaction with a nurturing environment, what might be thought of as its epigenome.

28. Evasion: *Dasein*, Deferral, Default, Deleuzion

28.1 Evasion. The importance for Stevens of “evasion,” deferral or default,) as a distinctive, perhaps defining, human “mode of being” derives from a central deduction from his poetics: insofar as the mind evades, abstracts and changes, reality by changing it into consciousness and insofar as “I” am my consciousness, then I am my ideas and fictions and “As I am, I am, P:VIII:18. Another way of phrasing this would be: if I am a trope or fiction, the tenor of that trope is my evasion or self-imagining and the vehicle the image I imagine. In the following passage from a later poem, Stevens asserts that every poem is a metatext and, further, that human life itself is an “endlessly elaborating poem,” an “amassing harmony” and “supreme fiction,” or in Hölderlin’s words, “Man dwells poetically,” that is, by his evasions.

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry
As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness
The heavens, the hells, the world, the longed-for lands.
- "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," XVIII:10-18

28.2 Heidegger's *Dasein*. Stevens' "realization" that I am not *what* I am but "*as* I am" and that humans live "as if," as self-made fictions, finds an unintentional echo in his contemporary, the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976.). Heidegger's philosophical project could be thought of as rearguard action to preserve the goals of metaphysics, to speak about ultimate reality, a primordial or given being, without recourse to metaphysical presuppositions. He proposed to accomplish this through an "existential" or experiential analysis of man's "already thrownness" into the world which could define a human ontology or species being which circumvented Kant's mental categories which constituted or merely "ontic" or attributed qualities to being. He named this instinctual human essence, his MacCollough, *Dasein* (Ger. > *Da*- here, there + *sein* to be) being-here or being-towards-the world and described its distinctive mode of being or essence as "that being for whom its being is a question," for Heidegger the question of time, specifically, death or *Angst*. His definition can, however, be read, in light of Stevens' poetics, as meaning that being whose essence is that it *does not* have an essence, whose mode of being is constructing his own, being a fictional one, which is precisely the opposite of Heidegger's intent, to recuperate a "primordial," ontologically given human mode of being.

28.3 Stiegler's "Epimetheon Man" The French neo-Heideggerian philosopher, Bernard Stiegler, (1952-) has attempted to bioengineer Heidegger's *Dasein* into a Paleolithic creature of his own, "Epimethean Man." The name derives from a Greek creation myth in Hesiod where the dim-witted Epimetheus, maker of the animals, forgets to leave any attributes for man, a deficit rectified by his brother Prometheus at considerable personal cost. As a result, humans alone among the creatures have to survive, not by their innate or given qualities, instincts and physical prowess, but through "prostheses," that is tools, culture and knowledge, which Stiegler groups together as "technics" (Gr. > *tekne* know-how.) In Stiegler's view, humans live "by defaulting" or "deferring" to these technological tropes for themselves. Thus *homo faber*, man the maker, crafts not only his objects and tools of his survival, but, in a sense himself. Similarly, potentials inherent in technology may shape the trajectories for human social and even genetic

evolution. Epimetheus can therefore be seen as launching the Anthropocene Era of the present by default.

28.4 Derrida's Deferral. Stevens' own definition of "life, as it is, in the intricate evasions of as," also resonates with Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) theory of discourse as a "circle of deferral." Often credited as the "father of deconstruction," Derrida asserted that discursive regimes were essentially self-referential, tautological systems which imbricate (literally construct a roof of overlapping tiles which is impermeable to outside seepage) or blinker their speakers to other perspectives and the disjunctions and contradictions between that discursive regime and the world of which they purport to speak, Stevens' "reality," Levinas the *il y a* and post-modernists' alterity. Derrida contended that the speakers of these discourses are deluded in thinking they express themselves through them, rather these discourses express themselves through the speakers who have internalized their vocabulary and grammar, thus becoming instruments of their own oppression.

28.5 Deleuze's Duping. Derrida's fellow deconstructionist, Gilles Deleuze, (1925-1995) broadened Derrida's grammatology, as Stevens did his poetics in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," to encompass all human activity, declaring that, "The activity of life is like a power of falsehood, duping and seducing," a denial of the mind's blindness as it stumbles through Maurice Blanchot's (1907-2003) "second night" or Stevens' unknowable reality. Stevens anticipated these misgivings when he confessed that "the motive for metaphor is to escape a final reality immenser than a poet's metaphors...to shrink from the weight of primary noon, the ABCs of being." This view of poetry as an evasion or deferral of "reality" seducing the mind with its fictions could account for Stevens' life-long suspicion that his poetic proclivities were not just frivolous but cowardly. It makes his late "return to the real," retraction of his faith in the imagination and (half-hearted) celebration of "mere being" seem in retrospect inevitable. Stevens' characterization of poetry and more generally conscious life as a travesty of "reality" has linked him to a current in contemporary thought broadly labeled "post humanism" (see note 42.)

29. Stevens/Whitman

29.1 Strange Bedfellows. Some critics have recognized the figure of the "good, gray," gay and garrulous poet, Walt Whitman, lurking in the moonlit night of canto C:VII, particularly, his Lincoln Elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Speaking of blooms, Harold Bloom has argued, not surprisingly, that Whitman is a major source of anxiety, if not of influence then association, for Stevens, whom he sees as his most important descendant in his canon of Romantic poetry. He has even suggested that the lascivious, slightly ridiculous, old satyr in C:I, the heartily-embracing comrade of C:IV:20,21, the loquacious sparrow in C:VI and the "ever-ready lover" here in C:VII this canto are disguised portraits of a poet in whom Stevens recognized aspects of himself

about which he felt ambivalent. He notes that Stevens, more gruff than gregarious, patrician not plebian, once distanced himself from Whitman's promiscuous extroversion when he quipped, "Whitman was stopped in his dooryard by his capaciousness," by which he meant not just his inexhaustible cataloging but an inclusiveness which led him not to transform reality so much as simply accrete it around him until, in the end, he welcomed being consumed by it.

29.2 Whitman's "Carol of Death." The second part of "Notes," "It Must Change," and the Lincoln Elegy can both be read as extended meditations on the role of change in reconciling man with nature — though they reach radically different conclusions. In canto C:VII, a Whitmanesque "ever-ready love" inhales the world directly into itself, rendering superfluous the tri-partite imaginative dialectic of "Notes" while supporting Stevens' crypto "counter poetics" of an unmediated emotional and epistemological surrender to the real. Whitman enthusiastically embraced his reversion to the real in the form of a return to his amniotic, oceanic mother's "endlessly rocking cradle," the Heraclitean flux from which all phenomena emerge only to be submerged. He celebrates her as his "strong deliveress," "sane and sacred death" in the following passage, known on account of its macabre "good cheer," as the "Carol of Death:"

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner of later delicate death. 140

Prais'd be the fathomless universe
For life and job, for objects and knowledge curious
And for love, sweet love — but praise! praise! raise!
For the sure-entwining arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet, 145
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee—I glorify thee above all;
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.

Approach strong Deliveress!
When it is so, thou hast taken them, I joyously sing the dead, 150
Lost in the loving, floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O Death.

- "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," ll.136-152

Whitman here merges his "song of myself" with the song of the sea, not the She of "The Idea of Order of Key West," but the "medleyed" lullaby and threnody of his trinity: mother, sea and death.

29.3 Stockholm Syndrome? Blake, as has already been noted, cannily deduced that any “cult of nature” or “natural religion” would end as a “Death Cult” venerating reabsorption into an indifferent and predicted that those who linked human freedom to nature would become Urizenic priests of mankind’s limitation before their tyrannical idol. Emerson, for example, in his late work, *Nature*, pronounced human agency powerless in the face of the unchallengeable force of natural necessity; the *Logos* which he once equated with human creativity now became one with an immutable natural law, whether inscrutable like Heraclitus’ or logical like Hegel’s *Logoi*. In essence, Emerson eliminated the middle term of his Transcendentalist dialectic: Nature > Freedom > Power such that it became an equation or tautology, a sterile “cold copular,” Nature = Power. Shelley in *Mont Blanc* at least resisted the “Power” of necessity in the form of the River Arve flowing from its glacial peak by means of man’s tragic awareness and contempt for an insensate tyranny of which it could not even be aware.

29.4 Thanatos. Whitman, in the passage above, embraces “Mother Nature” in a kind of Oedipal *Liebestod*, drowning in the orgasmic “bliss” of his aqueous thanatology. This reverse ontogeny, this regression to the primordial womb/tomb and retreat from individuation into unity, counters one of the most basic taboos, time running backward penetrating its own origin and “uncreating” its own creation, similar to the decreation of a mystic like Simone Weil. It nullifies the Third Law of Thermodynamics (the Humpty Dumpty Principle,) collapsing the expanding universe back into its primal singularity, the Hindu *bindhu*, while compressing poetry to a period. In terms of the dialectic of “Notes,” Stevens could only have perceived Whitman’s (or at least Freud’s) “Death Wish” as the opposite of “resisting the pressures of reality” – inviting one’s annihilation, a victory achieved only by identifying with the enemy. Stevens, nonetheless was to follow his own “road to Canossa,” far less sanguinely than Whitman, abandoning metaphor in his late poems for the “plain sense of things” and fictions for “mere being.”

30. Animus and Anima: Canto C:VIII

Some insight into Nanzia Nunzio’s “split personality” may be afforded by Carl Jung’s (1875-1961) gendered (and inevitably sexist) division of the psyche into an active, “male,” creative self or *animus* and a passive, “female,” receptive soul or *anima* whose “integration” was the goal of his psychoanalytic theory and prescription for psychic health. The terms have a rich etymology (L. > *anima* living being, soul, mind, passion; Gr. > *anemos* wind; Sans. > *aniti* to breathe; PIE > *ane-* blow, breath.) In C:VIII, the mind which produces (abstracts and changes) “reality” into consciousness and the mind which consumes these fictions as pleasurable experiences of who it have become separated, symbolized perhaps by the “absent presence” of Nanzia Nunzio’s “unintegrated,” male counterpart and putative husband, Nunzio, indicated by the masculine ending of her last name. In his absence, Nanzia foolishly turns to nature, as objectified in the stone head of Shelley’s tyrant, Ozymandias, rather than her own “male” aspect or creative capacity, to “speak to me that which spoken will array me...clothe me entire in the final filament...and know myself as precious for your perfecting,” C:VIII:16-18. Here she

could be compared with the Romantics who ironically turned to nature, the original source of their impoverishment, to provide them with the fictions to cloth their naked consciousness and invest it with feeling and meaning, so they could value, love and enjoy their existence and hence redeem themselves. Ozymandias tells her she can only do this through her own imaginative power, “the bride/ Is never naked. A fictive covering/ Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind,” C:VIII:19-21.

Following, as it does, the Whitmanesque embrace and reabsorption into nature in C:VII, the fable of Nanzia Nunzio can be read as a corrective or even rebuttal of its “counter-poetics” (note 26.6.) The fable recapitulates the dialectic of opposites in C:IV but also anticipates the gendered pairs of P:IV, the Captain and Bawda, and of P:V and P:VI, Canon Aspirin and his sister. They continue the process, begun here, of internalizing the dichotomy, reality and mind as the relationship between perception (reception, sensation) and cognition (creation, imagination.) Stevens may be drawn to these gendered personifications (see note 6) to represent intra-psychic processes in order to avoid the solipsistic or autoerotic implications of unifying the creator and recipient of mental pleasure. Finally, in P:VIII, he acknowledges that he is both animus and anima, male and female, such that, for a poet, “reality” is his fictions; his desired love object is an image of himself. Ozymandias will reappear in P:III as the “face of stone in an unending red,” another image of the Old Testament Jehovah, symbol of rigidity, rage and repetition, no longer capable of speaking, strangled by the overgrowth of time. He is replaced by the appearance of Christ, not as humanity’s redeemer but liberator, who “bade the sheep carouse,” that is take pleasure in themselves, analogous with Ozymandias’ advise to Nanzia Nunzio herein C:VIII.

31. Intratext: Canto C:X

In this final canto of the second section, “It Must Change,” Stevens reprises or summarizes many images from that section and section one, “It Must Be Abstract” which will also resonate in section three, “It Must Give Pleasure;” such cross-references or intratextuality are integral to “Notes”’ musical use of motifs and its thematic counterpoint. For example, the metaphor of the “upper air” in l.4 and 19 represents mental space, a stage on which the imagination enacts itself and a mirror onto which it projects its images. Thus the image has already appeared as Eve’s reifying mirror in A:III:3, the “bare board” of A:IV:17 and the “pensive giant” hovering in “violet space” of A:VIII:4, and will return as the “orbits’ outer stars” and “crown of night” in P:VI:11,13 and the angel’s “lapis-haunted air” in P:VIII:9. The deformed seraphs of C:I and C:VIII mutate into the metaphoric seraphs in l.6, both signs and symbols, who in turn prefigure the silenced angel in P:VI and rebellious angel in P:VIII. “Iris frettings” in l.9 recalls the “little string” and “banjo’s twang” in C:V:15, 21, while “beginnings, gay and green,” l.20 echoes the “very varnished green” in A:IV:6,7, the “zero green” and “green baked greener” in C:V:6,7 and

anticipate “my green, my fluent mundo” in the concluding P:X:20. “Gay” in l.20 recalls, “Gay is, gay was, the gay forsythia” in A:VI:9, while the “suitable amours” in l.21 contrast with the “strange relation” of A:III:21, as well as the unsuitable courtship of Ozymandias by Nanzia Nunzio in C:VIII which is corrected by the marriage of the Captain and Bawda in P:IV. The “momentary color” and “rubblings of a glass” in ll.5,19, which represent “aspect viewing” or an investment of meaning and affect, resonate with the subtle “fluctuations” and “degrees of perceptions” in C:VII:20,21 and the planter’s vision “seen rightly” or not “in a negative light” from C:V:18,19.

32. Pleasure: Philosophical Perspectives

32.1 Aristotle. Helen Vendler argues that Stevens attempts in “Notes” to find a “middle ground” in the age-old debate between objective reality and subjective pleasure, in Keats’ terms, “truth and beauty,” living well and the well-lived life. Aristotle defined the goal of life as seeking pleasure and avoiding pain but distinguished between *eudaimonia*, happiness or well-being, and *hedonia*, sensual gratification, on the grounds that the latter pleasure originated inside the self and the former outside it, resulting in dependence and anxiety over its loss. The classical Greeks contended that true happiness derived from developing one’s own inherent excellence or *arête*, “becoming all one that one was capable of becoming” by pursuing one’s entelechy, ideal type or destiny, thus realizing who one essentially was.

32.2 Epicureanism and Aestheticism. Stevens’ argument in “Notes,” that the end of poetry is pleasure in the form of ephemeral, subjective experiences or fictions, an “accessible bliss” providing the peace the mind seeks amid the “difficulty” of living in a “world not our own,” more closely parallels the teachings of Epicurus (341-270 BC) than of idealists like Aristotle. Epicurus was a materialist follower of Democritus who held that since reality was based on random atoms not ideas or divine law, humans’ only obligation was to live as pleasant lives as possible. This position has often been inaccurately equated with hedonism, although Epicurus actually discouraged sensual indulgence as addictive, insatiable and hence a source of unhappiness; he appears to have been a vegetarian and celibate whose school in Athens, called the Garden, was a highly refined sort of commune of like-minded friends. He defined happiness as *ataraxia* and *aponia* or freedom from care and pain, specifically the fear of death, Heidegger’s omnipresent *Angst*, which Epicurus argued was irrational since the self, insofar as it was conscious, would not be around to experience death. His followers’ grave stelae accordingly often bore the Latin epitaph: *Non fui, fui, non sum, non caro*, “I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care.”

Renaissance humanists rediscovered Epicurus’ work in the 15th and 16th Centuries after long obscurity and obloquy during centuries of medieval gloom and like him stressed, discretely, the pleasures and achievements of this life over those of the next. Similarly, 19th Century aesthetic movements advocated what has been derided as a “religion of art;” for example, Theophile Gautier, (1811-1872) coined the slogan “Art for art’s sake” and Walter Pater commended “not the fruits of experience but the experience itself;” social opprobrium forced him to retract this heresy in a novel

tellingly entitled *Marius, the Epicurean*. Stevens' own "philosophic mentor," George Santayana, (1863-1953) subject of a late poetic eulogy, shared Epicurus' naturalism and Pater's aestheticism declaring that "beauty is pleasure objectified." He saw no difference between aesthetic and ethics on the ground that beauty being a human good must also be a moral good and art a moral pursuit (see note 37.)

32.3 Stoicism. An opposite school of philosophy from Epicurus' was taught in the Athenian Stoa, not far from Epicurus' Garden, by Zeno of Citium (c.334-262 BC) and Cleanthes of Assos (c.330-c.230 BC) and hence called Stoicism. It argued that the pursuit of pleasure was the source of pain and counseled indifference to worldly pleasures to prevent the inevitable disappointment of their loss and frustration, an argument paralleling that of Buddha. In the third section of "Notes," Stoicism is represented by two disillusioned, former Romantics, the "blue woman" in P:II:13 for whom "the frothy clouds/Were nothing but frothy clouds," that is, had been reduced to the "plain sense of things," and Canon Aspirin's austere sister in P:V who discouraged her daughters' dreams, presumably lest they share the same fate as hers.

"Romantic disappointment" has a strong Stoic component, for example, Wordsworth whom Bloom has called "the great poet of modern disappointment, tried to convince himself that the loss of his youthful "visionary gleam" has found "abundant recompense" in his compassion for the losses of others:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity.
- "Tintern Abbey," ll.88-92

Similarly, he claims it is "enough if" the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity, win for him salvation in the some future life:

We men who in our morn of youth defied
The elements must vanish — be it so!
Enough if something from our hands have power
To live and act and serve the future hour
- "Valedictory Sonnet to the River Duddon," ll.8-11

32.4 Asceticism. Stevens in his late poem seems to adopt a Stoic stance by accepting reality in "a time of dearth," stripped of "every fiction" and "ideas about a thing," settling, instead, for "the plain sense of things," the "sound of things which do not transcend themselves," "the poem of the fact in the language of facts" and, finally, just "a scrawny cry" in place of poetry. In his "death poem," Stevens rejects the artificial "bronze décor" of art in favor of "mere being," which makes us "happy and unhappy," a radical reduction of an "expressible bliss." It is precisely his final acceptance of

“Very Little...Almost Nothing...,” which commends Stevens to Simon Critchley, the author of the book of that title, his resignation “to things is their mereness, in their plainness and remoteness from us and we accept it calmly without the frustrated assertions and juvenile over-reachings of the will.” One is reminded of Freud’s goal for psychoanalysis, the acceptance of “ordinary unhappiness.” Could this be the face of Stoicism in a post-modern, post-Utopian, even post-humanist age, a mature “acceptance of reality” and “unflinching” pessimism, not without a measure of complacency and moral and creative lassitude?

Despite Stevens and Critchley’s professed atheism, their imaginative humility and self-abnegation is curiously consistent with eastern and western religious orthodoxy in its devaluation not to say discouragement of the pursuit of pleasure. Adepts of Brahmanic mysticism devote their lives to extinguishing the desire for pleasure to achieve *nirvana* in order to escape the pain of living by escaping *moksha* or reincarnation or *moksha*. Christian ascetics, pursue similar *viae negativae* to “mortify the flesh,” and numb their “worldly passions,” thereby annihilating the individual self to reunify with their creator (see note 26.4 .) The seemingly simplistic logic behind Stoicism and Asceticism that one can avoid the pain of life by rejecting life might strike some as “throwing the baby out with the bath water.”

32.5 “It Must Give Pleasure.” Stevens late “return to the real,” what might be termed his “Stoical Turn,” should not obscure the fact that he designates pleasure as the goal of his dialectical of the imagination in the most definitive statement of his poetics, “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction.” In light of religions privileging of self-denial, outlined above, and of Stevens’ own Protestant work ethic’s discomfort with imaginative pleasure, his championing of this goal is almost as surprisingly as Thomas Jefferson’s substitution of the “pursuit of happiness” for the “pursuit of property” in the American Declaration of Independence. Jefferson is rightly regarded today as a hypocrite and the nation he helped found notable more for its accumulation of money than the contentment of its citizens. Stevens, in light of his subsequent rejection of bliss for a hard-headed and perhaps hard-hearted realism, might be accused of similar duplicity but propounding goals more lofty than one’s flawed character can realize seems preferable than a unabashed pride in one’s lack of convictions. What seems more remarkable than the Puritanical recidivism of Stevens’ late palinodes, retracting a subjective redemption from our post-lapsarian “time of dearth,” is that he maintained his secular humanist faith in the power of imagination as long as he did in the face of the overwhelming opprobrium of tradition and his own overweening Reality Principle.

33. *Aporia* and *Anagnorisis*: Canto P:VIII

33.1 Thesis. In Canto P:VIII, Steven first intervenes in his poem as a character, dramatizing its writing as if in “real time” a device as old in English verse as John Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets* (1610.) He first announces his presence by the insistent tone of P:VII:13,14, “It is possible, possible, possible. It must/Be possible,” where the indicative “is” shifts to the optative or subjunctive “must,” stating not a fact but a personal desire or need, namely, “To find the real/To be stripped of every fiction except one/The fiction of an absolute,” ll.17-19. The existence of this

“absolute” is crucial both as the “real” base on which Stevens has built his poetics in “Notes” but also his “counter-poetics,” a reality glimpsed, “untransformed” through mental “quietude.” Stevens’ agitation is understandable since he also acknowledges here for the first time that its existence is not a fact but an article of faith, in his own terms, a fiction or “idea” like any other. Therefore, Stevens’ order to the angel of the imagination to be “silent in his luminous cloud” and listen to this absolute, the “luminous melody of proper sound,” P:VII:20,21 is equivalent to silencing his own doubts about its existence or testing his faith. His command marks the climax of the “counter poetics” to the active power of imagination, traced through “Notes.”

33.2 Antithesis/Contradiction. This order for silence and mental inactivity is, of course, contrary to the angel’s nature not to listen to music but to make it and to carry messages not sit still; therefore Stevens’ own creation or metaphor takes on a life of its own and rebels against his creator by contradicting his junction (the biblical parallels could not be coincidental.) He “plucks on his strings to “pluck abysmal glory,” P:VIII:3,4 making his own melody by plunging into “deep space,” the mind, to retrieve or carry back (abstract and change) a new image, a new metaphor or “first idea” for himself to replace the one his maker silenced in the previous canto. This plunges Stevens into a state of feigned *aporia* or bewilderment in which he turns to his readers to ask them – however rhetorically – “What am I to believe?” This split between Stevens and the angel recapitulates the earlier split personae in the poem, not just between “Notes” poetic dialectic and its “counter- poetics, but, as importantly, between the poet’s reality or personality and the reality of his imagining. Therefore this split mirrors the lack of psychic integration between Stevens’ anima, listening passively to nature and his animus actively resisting and transforming it.

33.3 Synthesis/Integration. Stevens then pretends to be surprised that he shares the exhilaration of the rebellious angel’s flight and so again turns to the reader to ask, “Am I who imagine this angel less satisfied...Is it he or is it I who experiences this?” P:VIII:7 -10. The reader, if he has imagined this thrill as well, is obliged to answer, “It is we” or “he is we.” Thus Stevens’ moment of *aporia* turns into one of *anagnorisis* or self-recognition, an epiphany where he sees that he is in fact the rebellious angel of his irrepressible imagination. Thus the ambivalence underlying all his poetry between imagination and reality is at the close of P:VIII temporarily resolved by the realization that his reality as a conscious beings is not his objectivity but his subjective, not God’s “I am what I am,” but Stevens’ “As I am, I am,” l.18 or “I am an ‘as if,’ I am as I experience myself in the ‘infinite evasions of as.’” In other words, the self is not the objective givens of a life, including its fate or mortality, but rather what the mind makes of those givens, in its continuous process of abstraction and creation of fictions or subjectivity. Thus the new image or “first idea” the angel “plucks” from “deep space” is Stevens own image, his self-recognition as his imagination; the motif of the angel of imagination has finally been internalized such that the angel and Stevens power to imagine him, to construct that fiction become one. Both the poet and his readers become self-conscious of their constructing a fresh meaning, “first idea,” image which is themselves, so they answer Stevens’ question at the canto’s beginning, “What am I to belief?” with “Believe yourself, believe your imagining.” The

implications of “unconcealing” or deconstructing” the reality of the subjective poetic process, both its writing and reading, is the subject of the following background note.

34. Diegetic Convergence

34.1 The Three Persons of Poetry. In cantos P:VII and P:VIII, Stevens makes “Notes” intentions as a metatext explicit by presencing both himself and his readers in an unusual moment when the three persons of the verb and three corresponding actors of any poem – writer, reader and text – coincide temporarily. This might be compared with what Stevens calls an “occasion,” a moment of shared qualitative time (Gr. > *kairos* opportunity) despite their separation in quantitative or clock-time (Gr. > *kronos* historic time. It should go without saying that Stevens’ sudden appearance (narrative *metalepsis*,) supposed bewilderment (*aporia*) and subsequent enlightenment (*anagnorisis*) are as carefully staged and “fictional” as any other part of “Notes.”

Up to this point, Stevens has confined himself to the role of the traditional, “invisible,” third person, so-called “voice of God” narrator, alternating between preceptor and fabulist or raconteur but in either case, outside the poem’s narrative(s.) The beginning of canto P:VIII, “What am I to believe...,” is the first time in the poem Stevens speaks in the first person and also the first time he directly addresses or interpellates the reader (however rhetorically) asking them, in effect, “What do *you* think I should believe,” even “What do *you* believe?” This implicates his readers as collaborators in the poem’s writing or at least acknowledges its inevitable rewriting or interpretation in the act of reading. Addressing the audience directly, as it were in the second person, as a participant in the spectacle, is commonly referred to in film criticism as “collapsing the invisible fourth wall” separating the diegetic (narrative) space/time projected on the screen from the hitherto erased, literally blacked-out, historically situated space/time of the audience. This convergence of “reel” (diegetic) and “real” (actual) time has been theorized as constructing a superimposed, porous, hybrid, hyper-temporality, similar to the moment Stevens stages in P:VIII.

[The resonance here among the three persons of the verb and the writer, text and reader might be thought of functioning in Stevens “religion of poetry” like the *perichoresis* or “dance” among the three persons of the Christian Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. In this analogy, God, “the all-creating Word,” would correspond with the author, Christ, “the Word made flesh,” with the text, and the Holy Spirit, the soul or indwelling grace, with the reader’s ability to understand and incorporation the text.]

34.2 Reader Reception. Readers are never simply passive recipients of a poem; they must bring to it prior knowledge, expectations, preconceptions and associations without which any text would be incomprehensible. They are called upon to reanimate and in a sense reenact the creative process of the poet, resulting inevitably in their own distinct, sometimes quite divergent interpretation of a text. As already noted, Hegel described this Lazarus-like resuscitation of the text as the “second spiritualization of the artwork,” of which its composition was the first. Reader reception theory allows for oppositional or transgressive readings of a text and Stevens himself made this negotiation

of meaning between the author and reader the overt subject of canto C:X. Harold Bloom's concept of "misprision" or deliberate misunderstanding of a text also allows, indeed makes essential, the poet/reader's evasion of the over-bearing influence of his predecessor, the author; his related advocacy of "strenuous reading" of texts is often revealing, always intriguing but sometimes arbitrary.

At a metatextual level, fore-fronting the author's intention and reader's affective response position the text in a metonymic relationship to the poet imagining it and the reader reimagining it, so that the text can appear to dissolve into these two subjectivities; in losing its autonomy and obscuring its outlines, it can be thought of as relating the poet and reader metaleptically. This idea of an active reader is in direct opposition to the formalist paradigm of a poem espoused by Eliot, Ramon Fernandez, Empson and the New Critics as a "verbal icon," an objective linguistic structure or constellation of resonating meanings, existing objectively and independently of both its readers' and author's subjectivity (see note 12.2.)

35. Metonym, Metalepsis, Metonymic Reduction

35.1 Metaleptic Narrative. Stevens' interjection of himself into his poem in canto P:VIII:1 makes "Notes," however briefly and even facetiously, what has come to be called a "metaleptic narrative," that is, one in which a third person narrator unexpectedly reveals himself as a protagonist in the events he has been recounting, casting that account in a new and often unreliable light. Metalepsis (Gr. > *meta-* across, beyond + *lambanein* to take) originally was an obscure figure of speech from classical rhetoric (also called *transumptio*) which was appropriated by post-modern literary criticism to describe such reflexive, modernist texts such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

35.2 Metonym. Harold Bloom has defined a metalepsis, cryptically he admits, as "a metonym of a metonym." A metonym is a figure of speech or trope of reduction because its vehicle is related to its tenor merely by association or convention, in contrast, for example, with metaphor, a comparison based on similarities. Synecdoche, the substitution of a part for a whole, for example, "the harbor was full of masts" instead of ships, is often classed as a type of metonym but in facts masts have an integral relation to ships. The term is used more frequently for the substitution of one term for another based entirely on contiguity, as in "the White House said" for "the President said," or "The pen is mightier than the sword," where the merely metonymic association between the vehicle, the pen, and its tenor, public opinion, underlines the disparity between the reduced means and powerful effect.

35.3 Metalepsis. In a metalepsis, Bloom's "metonym of a metonym," the middle term, the vehicle of the first metonym and tenor of the second, is omitted and must be inferred or supplied from usage. Metalepsis is so uncommon in daily speech that the most frequently cited example is still stilted: "I have to catch the worm in the morning," where the listener must supply the missing

vehicle or middle term, “the early bird,” from the bromide “the early bird catches the worm,” to understand that “catching the worm” means being an “early bird” and being an “early bird” means having to wake up early in the morning.

A kind of metalepsis is more familiar from what is known as “mixed metaphors,” proscribed by grammarians but the tropic engine of such justly celebrated passages as the following:

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

- *MacBeth*, V:5:19-28

Here the passage of time, “tomorrow and tomorrow,” is first compared to an infirm person creeping on his petty routines which is recorded to the final “syllable” of some tedious chronicle; the pointlessness of this chronicle suggests that “all our yesterdays” have merely lighted our way to death and that our lives have been simply shadows of our absence from the days through which we pass. Thus we become walking “shadows” not the living bodies which cast them, already the “shades” or ghosts of our former selves we will become. This figure staggering through life next suggests the immediate figures of the “poor players” performing their scripts, such as the one speaking this line, who, alternately vain and anxious, spends his hour pacing across the stage, reciting his lines like a character from Beckett, “a tale told by an idiot...signifying nothing.” This player, the actor playing MacBeth, has just impersonated the not inconsiderable “sound and fury” of Shakespeare’s tragedy on the stage of the Globe Theatre in Southwark, a microcosm of the larger globe. The audience, which can be considered the ultimate tenor of all these metaphors, has just spent this hour or three spell-bound by this illustration of its own “idiocy.”

35.4 Metalepsis in “Notes.” The motif of the angel of the imagination (note 23) can be thought of as tracing a metaleptic trajectory over cantos P:VII and VIII of “Notes.” The unexpressed (or suppressed) middle term between the angel “in his luminous cloud” and the “rebellious angel” is Stevens’ own imaginative process (see note 33.) They are linked not metaphorically but metaleptically as indices to Stevens’ absent or suppressed own imaginative process which invented them. The angel motif, like the poem’s other metaphors for the transformative work of the imagination, functions as a literal *deus ex machina* explaining the metamorphosis of vehicle to tenor, while disguising Stevens’ own absent presence, the ghost in this machine, as the artwork usually effaces or occludes its author, as he writes, “Not to be realized because not to/Be seen. Not to be

loved or hated because/ Not to be realized,” A:V:1-3. Stevens’ image for the imagination repressed or silenced in P:VII:20,21 leaps over its creator to become the liberated, rebel angel of P:VIII.1-6. In terms of Bloom’s Kabbalistic Romantic mythopoeia, the “organic ego,” the “objective” self, the given personhood of the poet, traverses the Crossing of Election to become the “creative ego,” a self-constituting imagination, the subjective self or fiction, which replaces and redeems his objective self. In other words, Stevens’ imagination, his power of abstraction and change, the first two steps in “Notes” dialectic, does not obey the censorship of his Reality Principle, the reminder of objective givens of his *ethos*, but follows his libido or Pleasure Principle, represented by the rebellious angel, thus fulfilling the poem’s third step: “It must give pleasure.”

35.5 Metonymic Reduction. Stevens’ reflex or instinct, as noted by several critics, to qualify, deflate or discount his claims for the imagination often manifests itself through a process Bloom dubs “metonymic reduction.” The expression may derive from a familiar logical procedure, eidetic reduction, in which an *eidos* (Gr. >idea, general type, essence) is defined by the elimination of all its non-essential or “accidental” *qualia* (attributes,) which could be seen as a kind of apophantic definition by exclusion or negation. Bloom often uses this term to mean reduction to a “first idea,” the original content of a metaphor since if an image can be shown to be merely a variant of another it is not original, but a “late plural” and hence a failure of imaginative power. Eidetic reduction and the idea of reduction to a “first idea” necessarily presumes the existence of a real essence, “thing-in-itself” or absolute at the end of the process (a problematic assumption, see note 26.5.) In Stevens’ most reductive mode, even “first ideas,” in common with any idea in the extended philosophic sense must be a mental construct or fiction and hence an “idea about the thing not the thing itself.” Hence, a “first idea” or any idea can and must be further reduced to a non-idea, its presumed “real” base, for example, “the inconceivable idea of the sun,” A:I:3. There is no place for the inconceivable in poetry because poems are conceived, mental objects comprised of ideas and words which are by definition different from their referents or “things-in-itself.” In this sense, language can be said to have an only metonymic relation to reality because it is associated with it only by convention and usage. In terms of Pierce’s semiotics, a word is a symbol of its signified not an index or icon.

36. The Final Fiction

36.1 Stevens’ “Crystal Hypothesis.” The final image in “Notes” has struck some readers as incongruous, even lifeless and hermetic compared with the curvaceous “fat girl” of the canto’s opening and the “fluent mundo” of its end; it could be irreverently pictured as a “snow globe.” The image of a crystal is immediately reminiscent of Emerson’s seminal epiphany in *Nature* (1836;) “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” In any event, the image bears close attention as Stevens’ final attempt in “Notes” to describe the “abstraction” or ideation of the “pressure of reality” in a fiction, the dialectic of the imagination which the poem has been at pains to expound.

The one prior mention of “crystal” in the poem comes appropriately in Stevens’ description of his “beau linguist,” (apparently fluent in both French and Spanish,) MacCullough, a previous metaphor for the imagination’s transformation of the real into the fictional: “Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis/ Incipit and a form to speak the word,” A:VIII:8,9. In philosophy, logos and logic (Gr. > word, law) refer to an intelligent or intelligible order which speaks the world as in Genesis or Scholasticism Book of Nature. But MacCullough is, as Stevens acknowledges, an “expedient,” figure of speech or personification, a disembodied, hypothetical or ideal form or abstract idea for human imagination not a divine creator. He portrays this “everyman” version of the exalted “She” of “The Idea of Order at Key West” as translating the amorphous, fluxional sea of reality into words through a kind of osmosis, suggesting the elusive goal of a “transparent interface” in software design or his own “counter-poetics” of an unmediated vision. But *traduttore, traditore*, “to translate, is to betray” inevitably, and osmosis is a physical not psychological process, so MacCullough provides an insufficient explanatory metaphor for the synthetic activity of the mind. Stevens will try out many other metaphors for the imagination, starting in the following canto A:IX and ending with the “fluent mundo...revolving in crystal,” is the last. These repeated attempts could demonstrate both Stevens’ inventiveness and reveal a fundamental contradiction in his poetics.

36.2 Peace vs. Pleasure. Stevens is committed to retaining reality’s rich, ever-changing but also disruptive flow of random sense experiences, the “moving contour” of the canto’s beginning. At the same time, he wants to convert this flux into the imagination’s ever-changing fluency in producing new fictions, in order to contain the “turning world” of nature in the crystalline order and clarity of language, in short, in a “fluent mundo.” The only connection between nature’s flux and verbal fluency, however, is their common etymology, (L. > *fluere* to flow, PIE > *bhleu* to swell, well, overflow) unless one is willing to postulate a common, underlying metaphysical logos or force of change, which Stevens does not. This image encapsulates a paradox, already noted, in Stevens’ dialectic of the imagination: that the Sisyphean task of continually transmuting (abstracting and changing) the “pressure of [an ever-changing] reality into a steady stream of freshly-minted “first ideas” or fictions defeats the goal of mental peace and crystalline stillness it is intended to produce. This final metaphor quite deliberately returns to the image of “living changefulness” combined with “transparence” and “peace” from the poem’s dedication:

In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.
— “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction,” Dedication ll. 4-8

This calm also seems inconsistent with the heroic flight of the angel of the imagination two cantos earlier in P:VIII while it undercuts the analogy between the poet and a soldier in the poem's Epilogue which immediately follows this metaphor. Mental peace, on its face, seems an unlikely, if perhaps understandable goal, for a poet, especially one as prolific as Stevens. As Nanzia Nunzio discovered in C:VIII and Stevens himself in P:VIII, it is in the nature of the angel of the imagination and the "never resting mind" not to be still, neither silent nor motionless, but to fly, create and chatter. It could be argued that the creation and satisfaction of a fiction are inseparable; Stevens suggests as much in *The Necessary Angel* when he describes an original image as "the precious portent of our powers" or as he does in "Notes:"

....The freshness of transformation is
The freshness of a world. It is our own,
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves
— "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," C:X:16-18

Even in this final fiction, Stevens does not appear to have resolved the question of how to retain the unconstrained, autonomy of reality within the ordered consciousness of the mind; the dichotomy remains unresolved as perhaps it must.

36.3 A "Transgressive" Reading. Stevens' ambivalence towards the imagination and more particular to the project outlined in "Notes" leaves open the possibility of an "oppositional" reading of this image, one suggested by Blake's poem "The Crystal Cabinet," though not necessarily to Stevens. Stevens does at least seem to have had Blake in mind around this time as evidenced from a predictably disapproving reference to that poet's self-mythologizing in a letter from 1946. In Blake's poem, the poet admonishes himself against what Stevens calls "the ravishments of truth" in A:II:4, that is, seduction by the subjective satisfaction of one's own fictions into objectifying (or reifying) them as an external entity. The speaker of that poem locks himself in a "crystal cabinet" of his own consciousness, so fragile that it shatters on the first contact with reality, leaving him bereft even of his imagination. Given that Stevens was especially sensitive to just such solipsistic susceptibilities, a "subversive" reading of the image as suffocating or freezing the world's vitality in the vitrine of the mind is conceivable. The image is curiously reminiscent of the bloodless world of "snowy scents" rejected in "The Poems of Our Climate" and the deathless but also lifeless mechanical perfection of the gold-feathered bird in his "death poem," "Of Mere Being." If the image is read as a critique rather than crystallization of "Notes'" thesis, it would cast its dialectic of the imagination in a new and questionable light, foretelling Stevens' subsequent "return to the real." This seems, however, too much weight to place on a single, less than satisfying image especially after Stevens' elevation of subjectivity in the poem's final cantos; it would impute a level of equivocation improbable even for as Protean a poet as Stevens.

37. George Santayana (1863-1952)

37.1 Biography. Santayana was a true heteroclit (one-of-a-kind) in 20th Century intellectual life; the son of a Spanish civil servant and a Catalan woman previously married to a Bostonian, he was educated at Boston Latin School and Harvard University where he became a professor of philosophy. In 1912 he turned down a chair at Harvard because he disagreed with President Charles Eliot's efforts to "professionalize" the university, preferring instead the life of an itinerant intellectual who spent time at Oxford and Berlin before finally settling in Rome where he lived until his death.

The prolific author of many seminal philosophic works, a brilliant essayist and celebrated wit throughout his long life, Santayana even authored a best-selling *Bildungsroman*, (a novel tracing the formation of its hero's character) *The Last Puritan*, in 1931 based on his observations of American life as an outsider, which garnered him a cover story in *Time* magazine. One of his many aphorisms has entered everyday speech: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

37.2 "Naturalism." Santayana's *Sense of Beauty* (1896) was the first major work on aesthetics published in America, while his five-volume *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906) constitutes perhaps the most systematic presentation of the pragmatism of his Harvard colleagues James, Royce, Peirce and Dewey. Santayana, like Stevens, was a "philosophical naturalist," not an environmentalist, but a materialist in the tradition of Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius and Spinoza. Accordingly, he considered consciousness an "epiphenomena" or direct consequence of physiological or material events in the brain. Stevens may have misinterpreted this to mean that mental phenomena were less "real" than material ones. More than the other pragmatists, Santayana valued aesthetic pleasure as highly as practical outcomes, qualifying him as an anti-realist and subjectivist but not an idealist. This led James to label him an "elegant, cold fish" and a "Platonist," quite unfairly since he opposed metaphysics, even writing a book mocking German Idealism for believing objects must conform with thought rather than the reverse.

Santayana's early brush with Spanish Catholicism made him a life-long atheist who described religions as the "great fairy tales of the cosmos," though, like Stevens, he feared their loss had left modern man naked and susceptible to material rather than aesthetic substitutes. A letter to Daniel Cory, his secretary, confidante and literary executor, dated January 21, 1945, parallels Stevens' stated sentiments about religion: "We must see heaven in the midst of earth, just above it, accompanying earth as beauty accompanies it. We must not try to get heaven pure afterwards or instead. Christ is essentially a spirit of the earth. He is a tragic hero." Santayana goes on to worry that should he become unconscious some over-solicitous priest might administer the last rites, leaving the impression of a deathbed conversion such has been attributed to Stevens.

37.3 The Poem's Genesis. Stevens moving eulogy suggests that Santayana may have been the most consistent intellectual influence in the poet's life, the man who, in his judgment, came closest to

achieving a supremely fictional, in the sense of deliberately constructed, life as epitomized in the death Stevens imagines for him. The two men had known each other socially at Harvard and corresponded for a brief time thereafter but appear to have no direct contact for over four decades so Stevens' familiarity with Santayana's subsequent writing remains unclear. Many themes and details in the poem have been traced to an article Edmund Wilson wrote in the April 6, 1946 issue of *The New Yorker*, "Santayana at the Convent of the Blue Nuns," recounting a recent visit to the philosopher in Rome. It describes Santayana as having turned his "life into a work of art" by spinning an "iridescent integument" around him out of a life-time of study and writing. Wilson surmises that Santayana looks out from this chrysalis (or crystal) of monastic solitude, "a detached observer ...immune to the world's shocks...untroubled by the thought of death, his present, triumphant functioning appearing to so absorb and enchant him." He concludes with an image of the philosopher as a "Monad in the Universal Mind" which resonates with Stevens' final image.

37.4 A Requiem for a Former Self? Santayana's life was in many ways as unconventional as Stevens was deliberately conventional: a "freelance" public intellectual, disdaining institutional affiliations, probably homosexual and an unabashed aesthete with the air of a scholarly dandy. It is tempting to speculate that Santayana may have represented for Stevens' the unfettered life which attracted him but which he so resolutely resisted. The fictional Santayana conjured in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" would then become one more poetic avatar or alter-ego for Stevens' divided psyche; the figure eulogized in the poem is inevitably more Stevens' ideal than the man Wilson interviewed. Could the poem, at least to some extent, also be a requiem for the confident poet of "Notes" written by the disillusioned author of the other poems in *The Rock*? It is a eulogy for a man whose imagination triumphs over "reality" in its most implacable form, death, rather than one who resigns himself to his "mere being," as Stevens will in his own rueful "death poem" written just three years later.

38. "To An Old Philosopher in Rome:" Critical Perspectives

38.1 Transcendentalism and Pragmatism. [Topics in this background note have also been discussed in notes **1.7, 1.10, 5.3** and **5.4** inter alia.] David LaGuardia's study, *Advance on Chaos: The Sanctifying Imagination of Wallace Stevens* (University Press of New England, Lebanon, New Hampshire, 1983) attempts to locate Stevens within the late 19th Century, New England intellectual milieu of his Harvard years, specifically as seeking a middle ground between apparent opposites, the transcendental idealism of Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) and the materialist pragmatism of William James' (1842-1910.) La Guardia sees George Santayana, (1863-1952) James' colleague and the poet's acquaintance as providing a plausible link because of the central role played by subjectivity in the philosopher's and Stevens' work.

Finding a "middle ground" with Emerson, who preached "moderation in all things - especially moderation," poses obvious challenges. He was the leading theoretician and proselyte of American Transcendentalism, a frontier outpost of European Romanticism, German Idealism and the

Wordsworthian “cult of nature,” but informed by a uniquely American sense of “manifest destiny.” Emerson, an ordained minister, preached that his democratic everyman, Central Man, was destined to cultivate both materially and intellectually the transcendental implicit but still unexpressed in the vast, “virgin” continent’s “natural sublime.” Emerson would have agreed with his predecessor and fellow Boston divine, the Puritan, John Winthrop, that the American project was to build “a city on a hill” as “a beacon to all nations,” untainted by the compromises of the European past. Stevens too sometimes compared the role of imagination with taming and domesticating an alien reality with the fictions essential for survival in “a place not our own.” Unlike Emerson, however, Stevens maintained a cordon sanitaire between nature and mind, rejecting the notion of a transcendental or metaphysical power inherent in reality which the self could realize or make real.

Williams James, a generation younger, can be seen as reacting against Emerson’s sweeping metaphysics with the intellectual modesty of pragmatism, not to be confused with its popular stereotypes, an American philosophical tinkering, Philistine practicality or the “might makes right” social Darwinism of the Gilded Age. James argued simply that “truth” was not an absolute but could be determined only relative or situational values of humans embodied in history, (a point of comparison with post-epistemological perspectives. Pragmatism’s implicit radicalism consisted in its denial of any “natural,” “essentialist” or metaphysical legitimacy to the moral or social status quo, granting them merely the contingent sanction of accepted usage and functionality.

James did not ignore subjective or spiritual factors and, in fact, experimented with amyl nitrate, nitrous oxide and peyote, dabbled in theosophy and described himself as a “pantheist or pandeist.” Pragmatism thus came by a circuitous route full circle to Sophists like Protagoras who claimed that, “Man is the measure (Gr. > *kanon*) of all things,” perhaps a result of the common democratic ambience in which both developed. It was opposition to this moral and epistemological relativism or “pragmatism” which led Plato to propose his theory of unchanging, a priori ideas, the progenitor of all subsequent philosophical idealism or metaphysics.

38.2 Perspectivism. B. J. Leggett in *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1992) notes a Continental parallel with James’ low-key, pragmatic opposition to Transcendentalism in Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) dithyrambic polemics against German Idealism and metaphysics, in general. Nietzsche outraged Victorian propriety by arguing that “moralities,” what we would call “value systems,” “rank order” or “privileging,” were “beyond good and evil” or amoral, not inherently superior or inferior. A “world historic idea” gained dominance merely because it was asserted by *Der Wille zur Macht* or “the will to power” more forcefully. Whenever a “world historic idea” decayed into “passive nihilism,” that is rote ritual, skepticism and irony, it would be negated by the “active nihilism” of a new and “primitive” emergent idea, resulting in a “transvaluation” of reality in its own image. Since every value system would inevitably expend its generative potential, it too would become decadent and fall victim to the next “heroic idea” in a cyclical rise and fall of civilizations Nietzsche dubbed the “Myth of the Eternal Return.” He concept of the “will to power,” derived from Schopenhauer’s dichotomy between will and idea, functioned as Nietzsche’s own assumed absolute or metaphysic, the motor of his cyclical history, in

contrast with Hegel's Logic and its offspring, the 19th Century's "Idea of Progress" and Marx's Dialectical Materialism.

The point of similarity between Nietzsche and Stevens for Legett is their elevation of point of view or the investment of value (meaning and affect) over any objective standard of truth, a philosophical position broadly described as Perspectivism. There is an obvious analogy between the life-cycle of Nietzsche's "world historic ideas" and of Stevens' "first ideas," with their equally inevitable decay into a "late plural" of ritualistic repetition, petrifying into a stone head which cannot speak to the present. As he tells the ephebe at the beginning of "Notes:" "May there be an ennui of the first idea? / What else, prodigious scholar, should there be?" A:II:8,9. A parallel does not, however, prove an influence; an obsession with decadence ran through late 19th and early 20th Century thought (note 11.) Harold Bloom's agonistic theory of poetic creation in *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1973.) provides an equally plausible source, Freud's Oedipal struggle between youth and age, to overcome the castrating imagery and Imago of the father and "anteriority" by affirming the son's own (pro)creativity and the "myth" of his own originality. It might even be argued that by scripting the death, however eloquently, of his own philosophical mentor Stevens was participating in an unconscious act of Oedipal patricide.

38.3 Santayana's "Naturalism." Legett in *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* goes on to argue that Santayana provides the "missing link" between Stevens and Nietzsche, assuming one credits such an influence on the poet's work. Santayana defined beauty as "a purely conscious experience without practical efficacy," describing himself as an "intellectual atheist but aesthetic Catholic," sentiments which Stevens' own description of poetry as "a religion without practical efficacy or metaphysical illusions." Santayana applied James' pragmatism to a relativist or non-objective aesthetics similar to Pater's aestheticism, where beauty was not an objective quality inhering in an artwork or in nature but an epiphenomenon of the perceiver's mind, that is, a subjective response, where, "beauty was in the eye of the beholder." He argued that "there is nothing wrong about entertaining and enjoying an illusion without succumbing to it or believing it to be real," which also resonates with Stevens' credo, "One must believe in a fiction, knowing it is a fiction, knowing there is nothing else." Santayana admitted the possibility of what Stevens called moments of "sudden rightnesses" or random correspondences between the structure of nature and that of consciousness which offered a frisson of harmony amid the general dissonance of sense stimuli, Stevens' haven of "peace" in the face of the "pressure of reality."

Santayana and Stevens could thus be seen as belated adherents of an etiolated version of the "religion of art," though their "naturalism" or materialism denied the metaphysical synthesis which was the motive for the Romantics' "cult of nature. We might here recall that Stevens characterized "Sunday Morning" as a "pagan" rite to evoke what he described as "all of Paradise we shall know;" "To An Old Philosopher in Rome" could then be seen as Santayana's "assumption" into a secular or subjective heaven.

38.4 Aspect Vision. Charles Altieri in *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity: Toward a Phenomenology of Value*, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2013) compares Stevens' poetics with Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) view in his late *Philosophical Investigations* that words or utterances cannot be understood as logical propositions but as "speech acts" with implicit social meanings. The world perceived through such "aspect vision" becomes saturated with preconceptions, intentionality and emotional investments which manifest themselves in shifts (drifts, *clinamen*, swerves) of meaning, most clearly detected in verbal tropes ("turnings") such as puns and metaphors. Altieri usefully describes this as the difference between *seeing something* and *seeing something as* and notes the similarity with Stevens' "intricate evasions of as," where reality for the mind is not an objective given but an investment of human value. Such "aspect viewing" might be compared with Heidegger's (1889-1976) distinction between a world "present-to-hand," (the detached, "objective" viewpoint of modern science,) and a world "already-at-hand," ontologically invested with given or "primordial" meaning, (contrasting with Wittgenstein's socially constructed, evolving "uses of language.")

"To An Old Philosopher in Rome" is structured around such metaphoric transformations of the objective to the subjective, the material to the mental and the small to large, such that, its dominant trope might be said to be hyperbole, in the sense not of exaggeration but abstraction, a meaning beyond its "mere being" or "the plain sense of things." In this light, the poem can be read as Stevens' heretical transubstantiation or staging of Santayana's physical death as a metaphor for the "tragic" "grandeur" of every life lived on the threshold of oblivion, in the sense that death has been transformed into one's subjective understanding of it. It is Stevens' final paradox that he can imagine Santayana's redemption of his reality by his ideas but denies himself such consolation or "majesty."

39. Thanatology

"To An Old Philosopher in Rome" can be read as a late contribution to one of the world's oldest literary genres – not the eulogy but the guide to dying. The Egyptian "Book of the Dead," compiled between 3000-1550 BC is one of the oldest such texts to have survived. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, part of the *Mahabharata*, which most likely reached its present form around 500 BC, Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, assures, the hero, Arjuna, before that epic's climactic Battle of Kurukshetra, not to fear death because if at the moment of his death his mind is fixed on *dharma*, divine duty, he will achieve *samsara*, the escape from *moksha* or reincarnation. 10th Century Heian courtiers placed before the dying a *raigo* or painting of Amida, the Buddha of compassion, descending to lift the soul of the dead directly to the Western Paradise, in the hope it would have the same effect.

Montaigne famously defined the purpose of philosophy as "teaching us how to die;" Socrates' death in 399 BC, as recounted in Plato's *Phaedo*, became a model for a "death with dignity." Similarly, the Stoic Seneca's (4-65 AD) composed suicide in his bath ordered by Nero (where he purportedly had his wrists bound up lest he miss dinner) was cited as exemplary. Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (523 AD,) written while he awaited execution on the order of the king of the

Ostrogoths, has consoled many in their hour of need. John Donne (1572-1631), the metaphysical poet and divine, (“ask not for whom the bell tolls...”) is reputed to have rehearsed his death by sleeping in his own coffin and wrote as many poems about death in age as love in youth. The last of the seven rites of the Catholic Church, Extreme Unction, is still administered to every believer; it has even been rumored that Stevens experienced a “death bed conversion,” receiving final absolution from a hospital priest. Santayana, the “one invulnerable man” of Stevens’ poem, appears, despite the convenience of a convent, to have remained true to his atheistic principles and is rewarded with a moment of secular grace in Stevens’ poem.

40. Ruskin’s “Pathetic Fallacy”

40.1 “Poetic Realism.” Demands for “poetic realism” long pre-dated John Ruskin’s (1819-1900) narrow-minded, Victorian scruples about “truth in poetry.” Plato famously banned poets from his Republic because they imagined lies; even Homer had included centaurs in his *Iliad*. The idealists who followed Plato also believed art should be held to kind of truth-to-nature, not to natural appearance but to an ideal “truth and beauty” beyond it. For this reason, classical art from Phidias to Piero to Ingres has been an art of idealization not naturalism in the name of realism. Coleridge anticipated Ruskin by several decades in his auto-critique in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) of “Fancy,” of which his own “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a brilliant example, and elevation of Imagination, epitomized for him by Wordsworth because he revealed not a hallucination of nature but the higher reality implicit in it.

40.2 The “Pathetic Fallacy.” It is ironic then that Ruskin’s critique of the “pathetic fallacy” was aimed primarily at Romantic poets, notably Wordsworth and Coleridge, and perhaps at the subjectivism and aestheticism already germinating on the Continent. Ruskin wanted to ground aesthetics and morality in the same “objective truth” as the dominant scientific or positivist paradigm of his day and therefore targeted for opprobrium poets who claimed “objects...derive their influence not from the properties inherent in them...but from such as are bestowed upon them by the minds of those conversant with or affected by these objects,” precisely the claim made by Pater, Santayana and Stevens.

Ruskin cited to lines by a poetic non-entity, Alton Locke, “They rowed her in across the rolling foam/ The cruel, crawling foam,” to point, rather unnecessarily it would seem, that “Foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl.” He went on to diagnose such aberrations as the symptoms of psychological infirmity and assigned a name to the syndrome, “That state of mind which attributes to these the characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the ‘Pathetic Fallacy.’” Ruskin proceeds to establish a taxonomy of four species of poets based on his fallacy:

The men who feel nothing and therefore see truly [presumably critics;] the men who feel strongly, think weakly, and see untruly (second order of poets); the men who feel strongly, think strongly, and see truly (first order of poets); and the men who, strong as human creatures can be, are yet submitted to influences stronger than themselves and see in a way untruly, because what they see is inconceivably above them. This last is the usual condition of prophetic inspiration.”

- John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. iii, pt.3 §5, §9, 1856.

Few have doubted that Ruskin included Wordsworth and Coleridge among the “second order poets,” while Shakespeare was predictably pressed into service to illustrate a “first order poet.” The demand for “poetic realism” continued into the Twentieth Century, in reaction to the rise of abstraction and “formalism,” most harmfully in the dictate for “socialist realism” handed down by Stalin’s mouthpiece on culture, Maxim Gorki, a taste, incidentally, which the Russian dictator shared with Hitler. Ironically, during the Cold War of the 1950s, right-wing American nativists condemned abstract expressionism, modernist architecture and atonal music as “Communist plots” or “creeping European socialism.”

40.3 The “Cry of Its Occasion.” Stevens’ “defense of poetry” from demands for “poetic realism” was based on what was characterized in the introduction and note 1 as a relativistic or “post-epistemological” stance towards poetic truth. He warned poets to distance themselves from “the lovers from truth” to free themselves from an epistemologically untenable standard of verisimilitude or “truth to nature.” In its place, he called for a truth to human nature, a perspective or “aspect viewing” on nature which would satisfy the needs of a situated subjectivity in a particular *ethos*, place or time, which would be “the cry of its occasion.”

41. Paratext: “Of Mere Being”

A poem’s paratext, (Gr. > *para*- beyond + Eng. Text) the texts-beyond-the-text or its intertextuality, comprises the fabric of literary allusions, associations and precedents in which a text is woven intentionally and not. A familiar example might be T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* where the poet footnoted, not without irony, his poem’s gallimaufry of archetypes and recondite references for his more benighted readers. “Of Mere Being,” whose theme appears to be nothing more than mere being, even its own mere being as a poem, would seem unlikely to need such an elaborate critical apparatus. Nonetheless, it directly references two poems by Yeats, several of Stevens’ own poems, not least his Santayana elegy, and inevitably the tradition of “death poems” (see note 39.)

41.1 Yeats’ Byzantium Poems. “Of Mere Beings” clearest and closest precedents are a pair of late poems by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) which present opposing perspectives on the relationship between life, mortality and artifice as symbolized for that poet by Byzantium

(Constantinople, present-day Istanbul) capital of the Eastern Roman Empire from 332-1457. A mechanical metal bird figures in both, an automaton reported to have been constructed for the palace of the Emperor Theophilus around 942 AD. In the earlier of the two poem, “Sailing to Byzantium,” (1926) Yeats asks that his soul be gathered from his aging body and lifted “into the artifice of eternity,” the eternal order of the universe, which for him meant the rather mechanical gyres or cycles of world history hypothesized in his *A Vision* (1925.)

Sages standing in God’s holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul. 20
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take 25
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enameling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing 30
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.
– “Sailing to Byzantium,” ll. 17-32

17. God’s holy fire – the refining fire of the Holy Spirit, which descended on the disciples at Pentecost and which purifies the soul of sin in Dante’s *Purgatorio* preparatory to its entry into Paradise. Yeats associates this with the gold mosaic backgrounds against which the saints were depicted in Byzantine churches, for example Hagia Sophia (532) and the Chora church (1077.)

19. perne in a gyre – The whirling bobbin or spindle of a spinning wheel around which thread is wound in a “gyre” or spiral motion. Yeats uses the image of two interpenetrating gyres to describe the cycles of reincarnation and history in the esoteric system outlined in *A Vision*.

22. dying animal – his body. Yeats was much preoccupied by age, especially the loss of sexual potency, even undergoing the medically dubious Steinach operation to increase his testosterone production.

27. Grecian goldsmiths – The Byzantine Empire was centered in Greece and Greek was its official language. Yeats refers here to the Byzantine artificers of the metal bird.

Three years later in 1929, Yeats published a second poem, “Byzantium,” which appears intended to retract his previous position; his Paradise of artifice has become a lifeless Hell, the deathless poet, a zombie or living dead and the “changeless metal” bird, a “cock of Hades” – as well, presumably, the prototype for Stevens seductive “gold-feathered bird.” The poem attributes the protracted decline of the Byzantine Empire to its decay into empty ritual and artifice for its own sake.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade; 10
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman; 15
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow, 20
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.
– “Byzantium,” ll. 9-24

10. The image is the image of himself imagined in “Sailing to Byzantium,” which is even less than a “shade,” a dead man, because just a poetic image, an ideal or empty abstraction.

11. bobbin – The obscure, occult “perne and gyre” of “Sailing to Byzantium,” l. 19 is here reduced to a machine part, a bobbin, and the image is no longer of the transmigration of the soul through the gyres of *A Vision* but a mummy wrapped in its winding sheet.

13. unwind the winding path – reverse the winding path of life which winds up in death.

15. the superhuman – cf. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* or “superman.” Yeats had been sympathetic to Mussolini’s cult of the hero, his Fascist Blackshirts and their the Irish counterparts, the Blueshirts.

17. more miracle – in the sense of a prodigy of nature or a monster; more than man-made; an apparition, perhaps a hoax.

19. golden bough – another golden “imitation of life,” like the birds in “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Of Mere Being.” In *The Aeneid*, Book VI, a golden bough is the talisman allowing Aeneas to visit the Underworld where he the future greatness of Rome is predicted,

cf. note 1.15. J.G. Frazer (1854-1941) adopted this image as the title of his influential, 13-volume study of comparative religious archetypes cited by Eliot in *The Waste Land*.

24. complexities of mire or blood – life reduced to its elements, its “mere [that is, material] being;” a “handful of dust” mixed with blood, molded into a mud figure, cf. “the evilly compounded vital I,” “The Poems of our Climate,” l.13 and the second account of the creation of Man, Genesis:2:4-25.

Stevens may have felt that his own earlier elevation of the imagination and its fictions had been similarly misguided and was making amends by his “return to the real,” which in effect makes his last poem, also a “last confession” of the sin of imaginative pride, attempting to create an artificial universe instead of submitting to his God-given “mere being.”

41.2 Keats’ Odes. It seems unlikely that a poet as steeped in Keats as Stevens would not have had in mind his five odes of 1819, his meditations on his imminent premature death, when composing his own “death poem.” The “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” (see note 15) offers the most obvious comparison with “Of Mere Being” because there Keats compares the ephemerality of life with the immortality but lifelessness of art, concluding that the urn is a memento mori testifying to the irrecoverable lost-life sculpted on it. The urn’s tautological “cold pastoral” or chilling lesson, “truth is beauty, beauty truth,” teaches that life’s truth is its transiency which lends it an elegiac beauty, the theme of Keats’ next ode, the “Ode to Melancholy:”

She dwells with Beauty - Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips.
- “Ode to Melancholy,” ll.21-24

Stevens paraphrased these lines in “Sunday Morning,” VI:13 as, “Death is the mother of beauty, mystical” prefiguring the chanting men who:

... know well the heavenly fellowship
Of men that perish and of summer morn
And whence they came and whither they shall go
The dew upon their feet shall manifest.
- “Sunday Morning,” VII:12-15

In “Sunday Morning,” life’s beauty and value results from transforming the world into art, a second nature or pastoral Arcadia, while in “Of Mere Being” art is not what makes us “happy” but “mere being” whose inevitable losses also what make us “unhappy.” Stevens could be saying that if life is “mere being,” merely “not being” shouldn’t matter, much as Eastern thought questions the privileging of being over non-being in Western thought. In Keats’ final poem, “To Autumn,” he seems to have come to accept and identify with life’s ephemerality without “melancholy” but as a

part of its nature, a given. The poem does not describe life as “mere being” but as achieving a fulfilling ripeness and abundant harvest, surprising in one who died so young.

41.3 “The Poems of Our Climate.” As already noted, Stevens had occasion to write his own version of the “Ode to a Grecian Urn” in “The Poems of Our Climate” published in 1942. The poem’s autobiographical content, a reference to Stevens’ daily routine of arranging a bouquet of flowers on his return from work, lends it a disguised self-critical or confessional dimension which might be seen as anticipating “Of Mere Being.” It too condemns a hermetic world of inhuman, purely abstract beauty as frozen in a solipsistic rigor mortis and concludes with the return of an aesthete-prodigious son to the imperfections of reality:

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of one’s torments, concealed
The evilly compounded vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged, 15
Still one would want more, one would need more
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

There would still remain the never-resting mind
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed. 20
The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that in this bitterness delight
Since the imperfect is so hot in us
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.
- “The Poems of Our Climate,” ll. 11-24

The significant difference between the two poems is that in “The Poems of Our Climate” the poet returns not to the reality of things or “mere being” but to the erotically charged delight of “flawed words and stubborn sounds,” an embrace of poetry’s power to construct if not perfect, still satisfying fictions out of an imperfect nature and imperfect language.

41.4 “To An Old Philosopher in Rome.” The most immediate and also most enigmatic network of cross-references is inevitably with Stevens’ 1952 eulogy for George Santayana during which his own death could not have been far from his mind. “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” should not however, be read as a first draft of “Of Mere Being” since the former poem is so much more ambitious and triumphalist in tone, an affirmation of the redemptive power of subjectivity in the face of death, capable of transcending its mere being and its mere not being. One would expect Stevens’ own epitaph to be both more modest and more contrite in the face of reality, in keeping

with the other poems in *The Rock*, where “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” is an anomaly in terms of its length, poetic register and tenor.

Stevens ends his Santayana elegy with the atheist equivalent of an “assumption” into heaven except heaven can only exist on the final threshold of life since there is nothing on the other side. Its protagonist, in keeping with Santayana’s intentions, does not take refuge from his annihilation in a “death bed conversion” to religion or metaphysics; instead, he turns his physical demise into a tragic drama in which he is the hero by virtue of being its author. He constructs a dome, Wilson’s “integument,” of self-consciousness, if not of crystal, around himself, a shrine in the form of a moment of subjectivity he will never have to leave.

It is kind of total grandeur at the end...
Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.
- “To An Old Philosopher in Rome,” ll.71,76-80.

Santayana/Stevens thus transfigures his “mere being,” the givens or reality of his death, into a metaphor, idea or fiction, indeed, the sum of all his ideas and the culmination of a life of ideas, where he identifies his reality not with his “mere being” but the awareness and meaning he has built around it, like a shroud. In post-epistemological terms, Santayana could be said to have invested his death with value, transforming it without denying it.

“Of Mere Being,” by contrast, ends with Stevens seemingly disillusioned with his poetic project, the “the endlessly elaborating poem” of mankind, the “supreme fiction” or any fiction, which he now sees as not transforming but evading reality. He now perceives it as the search for a “gold centre,” P:VIII:6 here represented by the “gold-feathered bird” or debased as the “bronze decor,” a pure but inhuman abstraction, although in “Notes” he opposed this to the angel imagining a fiction where “majesty is a mirror of the self” and the self its own artifice.

41.5. In Place of a Conclusion. While Stevens renounces the poetic transformation of reality into fictions as the pursuit of pure abstraction or idealism in “Of Mere Being,” it should be noted – because Stevens does not – there is also no aspiration for the “realism,” found in his “counter poetics,” (note 26) the “unmediated” experience of the “thin-in-itself” hinted at in “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself.” Despite the poem’s title, and unlike other poems in “The Rock,” for example, “An Old Man Asleep” or “The Plain Sense of Things,” Stevens make no attempt to describe “mere being” in his final poem, perhaps because, as he so often has pointed out, anything he said about it would not be it, hence the poems flatness and lack of enthusiasm.

“Of Mere Being” in contrast with “The Course of a Particular,” is not so much bitter as rueful that his pursuit of the “gold-feathered bird” has been in vain. There is something here of Wordsworth’s disappointment in “Tintern Abbey” and the “Intimations Ode” and of his attempt to convince himself that the loss of the “visionary gleam” has been compensated by the mundane but human. Stevens’ half-hearted reference to being “happy and unhappy” and his continuing fixation on the “gold-feathered bird” does not convince us that “mere being” is more fulfilling than his quixotic quest. Unlike Yeats, he does not demonize the bird but accepts it for what it was — an illusion, indeed a fiction, a human creation, a promised respite from “the pressure of a reality” which could be no longer be resisted.

It is a platitude that the dream of escaping reality for an ideal, an “inaccessible bliss,” what Simon Critchley calls the “idealist temptation,” seems inherent in human psychology; If nothing else, the persistence of religion demonstrates its power to give credence to a fictions in the total absence of evidence. Perhaps it is an artifact of human’s divided state — part mind, part mind. One can, of course, have a wish knowing it will not be fulfilled or “come true,” in Stevens’ terms, “knowing it to be a fiction,” the difference between a tragedy and a delusion. A subjective desire need not be objectively realizable or realized to be experienced; as Stevens sometimes suggests, it may be only prejudice which privileges objective over subjective truths, Keats’ question at the end of the “Ode to the Nightingale,” “Do I wake or sleep?” “Of Mere Being” was Stevens’ farewell to a fiction and fictions but also to life, the “supreme fiction.” It is possible to read “mere being” not as the “real” but the “mere being” of the mind without illusions — in other words this poem; the dream and the knowledge that it is a dream is the essence of humans’ reality. Stevens, as death approached, may have felt that his “mere being” was neither his physical reality or his imagination but the dichotomy between the two which had shaped his poetry and to a large extent his life. It would be well within Stevens’ equivocal nature to perplex his readers with two seemingly contradictory elegies, one for each term of his binary poetic personality. He might reply to our frustration that “It was not a choice between, but of.”

42 Stevens and Post-Humanism: A Polemic

42.1 Post-Humanism. Stevens has been cited as an avatar of what has come known as Post-Humanism, notably in Gyorgyi Voros *Notations on the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City IA, 1997) and Cory Wolfe’s *What Is Post-Humanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2010.) Post-Humanism could be thought of as the ultima Thule of deconstruction, abjuring logocentrism and anthropocentrism, for a materialistic perspective, purged of any privileging of objective and subjective human interests. Both authors adduce Stevens’ pessimistic, not to say misanthropic, worldview and unyielding commitment to reality, especially in his late poems’ “return to the real,” as evidence of a similar de-privileging or *kenosis* (emptying) of mental activity and subjectivity in pursuit of the ever-elusive “poem of the fact in the language of the fact.” These undeniable tendencies in

Stevens verse have already been discussed, perhaps belabored, under the rubrics of Stevens' "counter-poetics" and "poetic realism" (see notes 26 and 40.)

42.2 Environmentalism. Post-humanist thinking developed out of tendencies in the environmental movement, particularly Deep Ecology, a term coined by Arne Naess in 1973 and elaborated in Devall and Sessions' *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (George Gibbs, Layton UT, 1985.) It has been advocated by such widely-read and diverse authors as Wendell Barry, Fritjof Capra, Bill McKibben, W.S. Merwin and Gary Snyder. Its basic tenets are that that human beings should leave a "zero footprint" on the earth and respect the "interests" of the environment as much as their own; at its most extreme, it characterizes homo sapiens as the most invasive species and deadly virus to have ever appeared on the planet.

An analogous cultural trend seems to have spurred a revival of the Romantic "cult of nature" in the figure of "Gaia consciousness," the chthonic earth goddess reconceived as a single, homeostatic, self-regulating organism, endowed with an intelligence independent of and subsuming that of humans. (It should be noted that a state of ecological equilibrium has never existed earth and therefore would be as unnatural as the man mismanaged Eearth, environmentalist deplore.)

Another outgrowth of Deep Ecology is the condemnation of speciesism, privileging the interests and perspectives of humans over those of other species, as articulated by animal rights advocates such as Peter Singer in *The Point of View of the Universe* (2014,) as well as activist groups like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and Earth First. Post-Humanism in its most rigorous form opposes the "interests" of any living organism over the radical otherness or alterity of non-living "things," cf. Francois Ponge's (1899-1988) *La parti pris des choses*, "On the side of Things."

Similar ideas seems to have influenced popular consciousness in the form of a pervasive "free floating anxiety" or distrust of science and innovation manifested in such familiar phenomena as opposition to genetically modified foods, vaccination, high-tension wires, mobile phones, stem-cell research, abortion and euthanasia and the rise of the health food and alternative medicine industries. Post-humanism seems to reflect of a civilization-wide crisis of confidence and pessimism towards the modernist project of social and technological "progress." This is a logical consequence of its control by neo-liberal economic and political forces who are aggravating such critical problems as global warming and growing inequality, coupled with the absence of any credible alternatives to them, apart from a defense of the status quo.

42.3 Necronautics. This disillusionment with modernity found theoretical expression in the deconstruction, post-colonial and critical cultural theories of the last century, for example, Emmanuel Levinas' (1906-1995) championing of the *il y a* or given, the radically other. Of

immediate relevance to Stevens' poetics is Jacques Derrida's and Gilles Deleuze's critique of language as a means for "evading" the incommensurability of alterity, Stevens' reality, and consciousness through discourse. Deleuze's analysis, (see note 28.2) if extended to its logical conclusion, could describe any living organisms as "deferring," "organ-izing," "colonizing" and "appropriating" its environment in a futile, self-deluding attempt to delay and deny its inevitable dis-organ-ization, de-composition, death and reabsorption into that alterity. Stevens, as noted, also suspected that the underlying motive for metaphor and thus poetry was a cowardly attempt to escape "a reality immenser than itself" and that language was a forgery of the "ABC's of being."

In contrast, Stevens' dialectic of the imagination outlined in "Notes" valorizes such "evasion" as "abstracting" the real and "changing" it into the "pleasure" and peace of fictions or "an expressible bliss." Harold Bloom has glossed this process with the Emersonian triad *Ethos* (nature, fate, the given) > *Logos* (the word, freedom, imagination) > *Pathos* (power, the influx of feeling, art.) Bloom proceeds to chart a tropism, similar to Stevens' "return to the real," in his Romantic predecessors, including Wordsworth, Keats, Emerson and Whitman, and foreseen by Blake. Here the object of *Pathos* shifts crucially from the poet's own imagination back to nature, analogous to the Kabbalistic Crossing of Identification, where identification shifts from one's fictions, when "majesty is a mirror of the self," to the power of the other, the force of necessity, the givens of human nature or its *Ethos*, the cosmos, Ananke, fate, Stevens' reality.

Identification with nature and otherness necessarily entails an acceptance and even desire for one's death and reversion to one's *Ethos* or origin, Bloom compares with Whitman's return to his mother, "sacred Death," and with Freud's *Thanatos* or Death Wish (see note 29.) This change converts the creative dialectic of "Notes" into a "cold copular," the sterile identity *Ethos* = *Power* and "dust to dust." This drive has found expression in one of the more provocative advocates of Post-Humanism, the International Necronautical Society, whose purpose, not without irony, is to counter the privileging of life over death. "It is no coincidence" that its resident philosopher is that exponent of Stevens' late reductivism, Simon Critchley, who figures so prominently in the introduction to these notes.

42.5 The "Escape from Freedom." Deleuze and Critchley's seemingly radical critique of humanism, as already remarked (see note 32.4) seems suspiciously close to the oldest of orthodoxies, original sin and primal hubris of thinking, specifically thinking the mind might master rather than submit to God-given nature. Since Freudianism shares the virtue of all religions, non-verifiability, Bloom's analysis of the Romantics' sublimation of their self-love and love-of-life to love of the other, ultimately a "Death Wish," might be countered with an idea of his own, the "anxiety of influence," the Oedipal Guilt of the young creator or son's need to dethrone his own creator or father. It is therefore not surprising then that this atavistic

cultural response should have resurfaced today, at the dawn of the Anthropocene Era, when homo sapiens has begun to shape, however unintentionally and irresponsibly, his own environment and, not inconceivably, his own genetic evolution. For the first time, reality, the material “ground-of-being,” is beginning to be altered by human judgement and politics, as Protagoras argued and Plato feared 2500 years ago.

We may be witnessing, as with both Pre-Socratic natural philosophy and the Copernican Turn, an upsurge of nostalgia for a pre-modern, metaphysical certainty, this time as a cult of alterity and the post-human, which in many ways resembles the pre-human. Today’s disillusioned post-modernists reject science, as their Romantic forbearers’ imagination, for failing to produce a promised Utopia in lieu of challenging the power relationships and ideological superstructure and power relationships deploying it. Modernity has not supplied an answer but has posed an unprecedented and daunting: what do humans want the earth and their species to become? The Frankfurt School developed an analysis of the return to tradition or myth, religious and ethnic identity, ultimately back to nature or *Ethos*, as an “escape from freedom,” (the title of a 1941 book by Erich Fromm,) exemplified by Nazism’s psychotic revanchism faced with the revolutionary changes unleashed by the first wave of modernity. The headlong stampede to some primordial *Ur-Heimat* or *Vaterland* to be reborn as Heidegger’s Frankenstein monster, the Neanderthal *Dasein*, in all its pre-technological, “ontological” pre-humanity proved in the end a Death Wish.

42.6 Which Stevens? Stevens’ secular humanist assertion of the fictional or self-made, character of humans and their society as conscious beings may suggest *malgré lui* an alternative to Post-Humanism: the unavoidable responsibility for imagining and fabricating a human future in the absence of God, Goddess or Alterity. Stevens even names the only logical goal for this creative endeavor, human pleasure, and points out two dangers in pursuing it. 1) It too must not be thought of as a metaphysical essence or absolute but will inevitably proliferate multiple trajectories towards new humanities. 2) Contrary to popular opinion, it is not synonymous with increased material consumption, as demonstrated by the best available research. The ultimate meaning of Post-Humanism, Stevens implies, is that this evolution is not just a means to happiness but its goal:

...The freshness of transformation is
The freshness of a world. It is our own,
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves”
- “Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction,” C:X:15-17.

At the same time, Stevens’ recrudescant “return to the real” should not be rationalized or romanticized as a courageous embrace of reality but rather a minatory reminder of the unconscious inhibitions and prejudices which imprison even the most incisive minds and which

will need to be squarely named and overcome to meet the tremendous task ahead. The challenges of the Anthropocene will not be met by deploring it but embracing the unprecedented responsibilities and opportunities it offers. Post-Humanism can mean the opposite of Pre-Humanism and Anti-Humanism, that is, beyond humanism, beyond human nature as a given towards human nature as art. Post-Humanism could be conceived as the future of humanity when humanity has taken charge of its future. Ultimately, it is up to the reader which Post-Humanist “Stevens” to hear and heed.